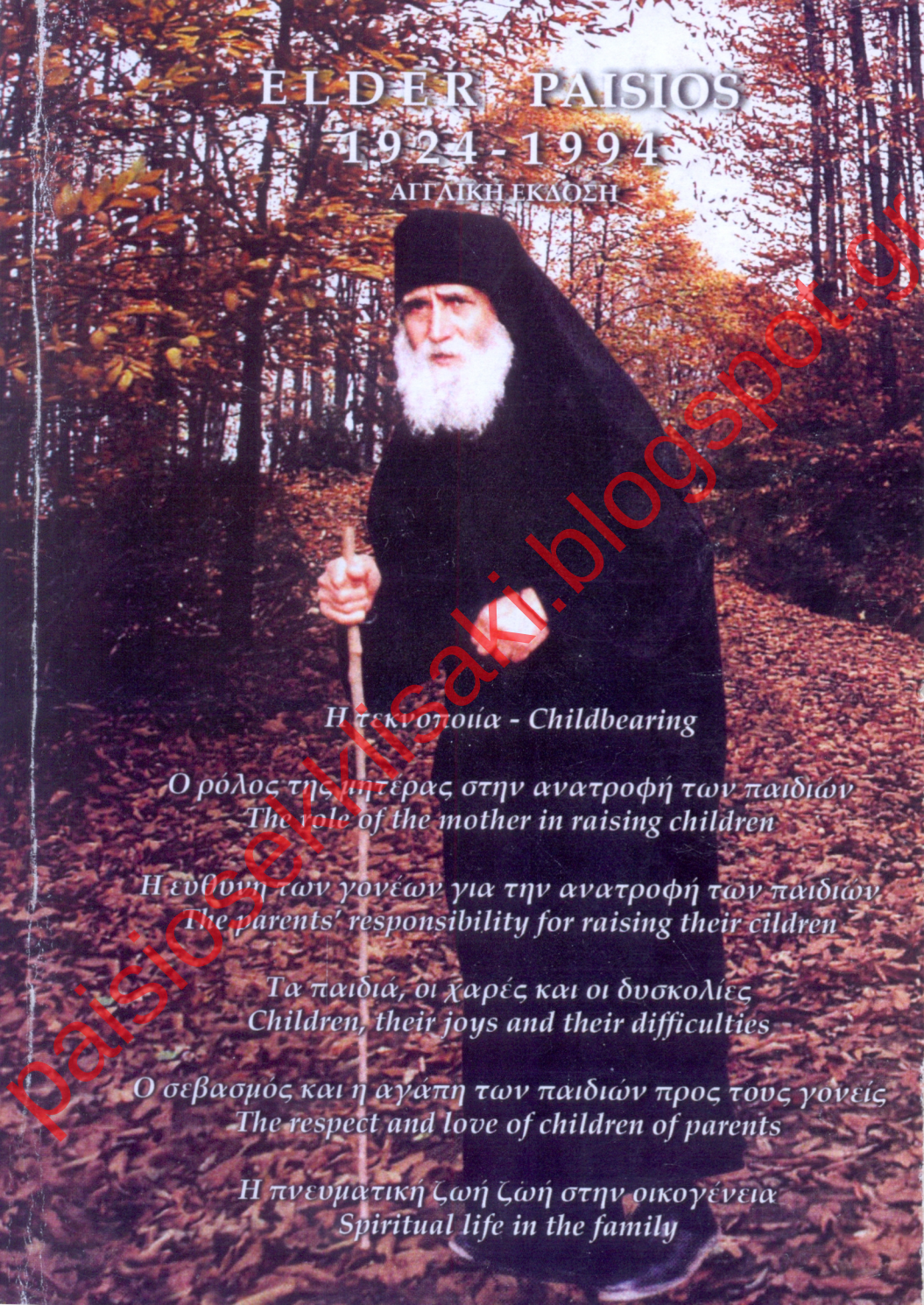
ELDER PAISIOS
1924 - 1994

ΑΓΓΛΙΚΗ ΕΚΔΟΣΗ



Η τεκνοποιία - Childbearing

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The role of the mother in raising children

Η ευθύνη των γονέων για την ανατροφή των παιδιών
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Η πνευματική ζωή ζωή στην οικογένεια
Spiritual life in the family

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A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PAISIOS

Paisios used to be one of the most enlightened Saint figures in our Church, the last decades. He was born in Pharasa of Cappadocia, in the middle east, on 25 July in 1924 and was baptized and named after Arsenios. His Parents, Prodromos and Evlampia Eznepide, were very devout and had ten children while Arsenios had nine siblings. Arsenios even from his infancy, received the blessing from God to be baptized by a Saint who lived in his area, the Saint Arsenios from Cappadocia. Saint Arsenios predicted the future holiness of the child, he asked his Godmother to name after him Arsenios, telling her distinctively that he wanted a monk to be in his stead, namely to have his name. Almost a month after Arsenios' baptism his family followed the road to Greece where he finally stayed in Konitsa. Arsenios since he was a child had a huge love for Christ and our Virgin Mary and he had a strong desire to be a monk. He loved going to the forest holding a wooden cross, he used to pray. At the age of 21 he joined the army, where he excelled in moral and courage. He always asked to go to the front line and to the most dangerous positions, he wished his own death instead of someone's else death. Many times he run the risk of being killed in order to save somebody else, a comrade-in-arms. When he did his military service he went to the Holy Mountain to become a monk. In 1954 he took monastic vows and was named after Averkios, and later on Paisios. He was a monk in the Monastery Esphigmenou and later on in the Monastery Philotheou. As a monk he had an exemplary obedience while he was trying to help the other monks whenever and however he could. From 1958 to 1964 Father Paisios is not in the Holy Mountain, initially in the area of konitsa where he will support thousands of souls and he will help them to escape from the fallacy of the heretic, while later he goes to the isolated and rough Sina, to Saints' Galactionos and Epistimis. In 1964 he returns to the Holy Mountain. His Elder Father Tihonas, many times during Divine service he saw as he himself confessed, the Herouvim and Seraphеim to glorify God. The Elder lived for a short time in the skete of Iviron and Katounakia. After the death of his Elder in 1968 he succeeded him in the cell of The Holy Cross. In conclusion, in 1979 he settled down in the Koutloumousiano cell <<Panagouda>>. Little by little his Holy Figure begins to become known to most pilgrims. The whole day, from east til west, he give advices, consoles, banish care, fill your soul with faith, hope and love for God, while at night he reads letters in tens which people sent them every day and prays to God, being sleepless for people who asked his help.

We heard that the Elder Porfirios (Malakasa), in his great mortification had said the following, for the Elder Paisios: f. Paisios' Grace has greater worth because he acquired it by a hard-fought struggle, while God gave it to me as a gift when I was young in order to help people in need...Saints like f. Paisios are sent to earth by God every 400 years!!!...

In the Holly mountain he led an ascetic's life and he spent there the most years of his life. The gifts that God embellished him with are many. He had the gift of healing (he cured a lot of people of a variety of illnesses, cancers, paralytics from birth and more.), he had the gift of against evil spirits (he cured many, exorcising evil spirits from people who were given a rough time) , he had the gift of prediction (he said to many people facts that will happen in the future in a personal level but he also prophesied of future events of our country to come) , he had the gift of far-sightedness (he knew someone's heart deeply and purely than the man himself, that's why he gave advices to a nicety and properly and everyone listened to the word he needed to hear), he had the gift of distinction in spirits (he knew to a nicety if a spiritual occurrence was by God or by evil that tried to deceive and mislead), he had distinction(he knew in any case which one was God's will and if he had to reveal it or not. He knew which one was good, right in any case. Even for non spiritual matters).

He had the gift of divinity. From many spiritual experiences he had with Saints, with Angels, with Virgin Mary but also with visions of the unbuilt light, in fact, he became a theologian and knew deeply the Sacraments of God.

These gifts and above all the elder's love, brought people close to him. Hundreds of people visited him in his cell every day. Endless comings and goings. The elder took the pain, the anxiety and the problems from people and gave them back a solution, joy and peace. Wherever it was worthy-he knew and God where and when-intervened miraculously, under God's rule, and solved the unsolved.

The elder Paisios was a gift by God to people. All this reputation was spread by word of mouth, by people who were surprised by his many

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kindnesses and his wonders... The Elder Paisios was brought out by God Himself.

Thousands were the letters which were sent. The Elder said:<<...or psychological problems or cancer or separated family...one of these three will be the problems...these problems give people a rough time...these kind of things they write to me>>. The Elder felt pain either in person or through letters and took it up self-sacrificed willingly... his heart went out to other people because he loved them. He didn't want and couldn't keep himself aloof when other people suffered. If it was possible he took up people's cross on his shoulder, in order to release them from their cross.

The Elder, while he was curing other people, he didn't asked God to cure him...He wanted to be patient with illnesses. << to make some spiritual money for the old age>> he said amusingly.

The Elder had many illnesses and endured them with bravery and fighting spirit. He felt contempt for pain and laughed at it!...

In 12 July 1994 The Elder Paisios consign his Holy soul peacefully and humbly to The Lord, Who loved so much and served Him since he was young. He was buried in the yard of the hermitage of Saint John the Theologian in Souroti of Thessaloniki.

After his death, The Elder Paisios continues to do wonders. We hope to become known the miraculous events that happened and continue to happen after his death, to glorify God and the faithful to gain advantage from it, but also for the mistrustful who see the words of God to be fulfilled two thousand years ago:<<Whoever believes in me won't die>> and <<Whoever believes in me, ……..>>

So, The elder as faithful servant of Christ, didn't die but lives and does wonders!
May we all have his blessings!

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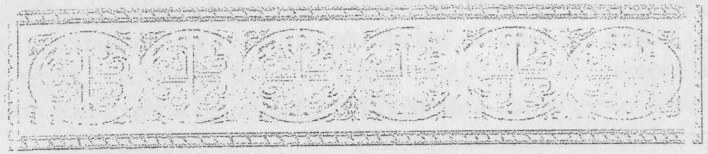

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CHAPTER ONE

Η τεκνοποιία

Childbearing

Saints Joacheim and Anna, the most dispassionate couple

Geronda, tell us something about Saint Anna and Saint Joacheim, the Ancestors of God. Sometime ago you started telling us something about them.

– Ever since I was a young boy, I had great reverence for the Ancestors of Jesus Christ according to the flesh. In fact, I had mentioned to someone that I wanted to be given the name of Joacheim when I became a monk. We are all so indebted to them! Saints Joacheim and Anna are the most dispassionate couple that has ever existed. They had no carnal mindset at all.

This is how God had made man and this is how He wanted humans to be born, dispassionately. But after the Fall, passion infiltrated the relationship between man and woman. As soon as a dispassionate couple was found, just as God had created man and just as He had wished them to be born, *Panaghia* was born, that pure and chaste creation, and then Christ incarnated. A thought occurs to

me that Christ would have descended to earth sooner if a pure pair, such as Saints Joacheim and Anna, had existed.

Roman Catholics fall into error and believe, supposedly out of piety, that *Panaghia* was born without the original sin. While *Panaghia* was not exempt from the original sin, She was however born as God had wanted human beings to be born after Creation. She was *panagne*[1] – all-pure – because the holy Ancestors' conception of Her was passionless, that is without sensual pleasure. The holy Ancestors of Jesus Christ, after fervent prayer to God for the gift of a child, conceived not by carnal lust, but through obedience to God. I had experienced this fact on Mount Sinai.[2]

Abstinence in married life

"*And God saw every thing that He had made, and behold, it was very good.*"[3] A man feels a physical attraction for a woman, as does a woman for a man. Without this attraction, no one would ever set out to start a family. Instead, they would only consider the difficulties they would have later in family life, with raising children and so forth, and they would never decide to make a start.

1. The *Theotokos* was born according to the natural way of human birth and not virginally. She was *panagne* (All-Pure), as Saint John of Damascus writes in his Homily, *On the Birth of our All-holy Lady the Theotokos and Ever-virgin Mary*, She was conceived "*chastely*" (see PG 96, 669A), and She increased, with Her own effort, the holiness She received from Her parents, warding off "*all unnecessary and soul-endangering thoughts before experiencing them*" (*ibid.* 676B).

2. The Elder lived ascetically on Mt Sinai, at the ascetic dwelling of Saints Episteme and Galaction, from 1962 to 1964. He did not reveal this event to us.

3. Gen 1:31.

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In those years after the Fall of the first-created, Adam and Eve, the carnal mindset in some people might have been five percent, in others ten percent, thirty percent, and so on. Nowadays, however, where is anybody going to be found who has a carnal mindset of only five percent, that is, one who has a pure frame of mind! At any rate, God has given all people the potential to attain dispassion – if they struggle with *philotimo*.

The married are not justified, simply because they lead a married life, in forgetting that they are not only flesh, but also spirit, and should therefore, not let themselves be unbridled.[4] They must struggle to subjugate the

4. In a letter, Elder Paisios had written the following about marital relations: "*Regarding the subject of the conjugal relations of married priests, but even of laypeople, which you mentioned to me – since the Holy Fathers do not determine how these should be precisely, this means that these are not something that can be so determined, simply because all human beings cannot be fitted into one mould. The Fathers leave this subject to the discernment, the philotimo, the spiritual sensitivity and the strength of each person. In order to make myself more understandable, let me tell you about some struggling married priests and laymen who are now living and are personally known to me. Among them are those who had conjugal relations after marriage and had one, two, three children and then lived virginally. Others come together only once a year for the purpose of procreation and then live together without sexual relations, as brother and sister. Others abstain during the periods of fasting and then resume their relations. Others cannot uphold even this practice. Others again come together only once in the middle of the week, so it is three days before and three days after Holy Communion. Others will stumble even here, and this is why Christ's first words when He appeared to the Apostles after the Resurrection were: 'As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you... Receive ye the Holy Spirit. Whosesoever's sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosesoever's sins ye retain, they are retained.' (Jn 20:21-23). The goal here is for each couple to struggle with discernment and philotimo, according to their spiritual strength. In the beginning, naturally, the age of the couple will not help; but as the years pass and the flesh is weakened, the spirit can prevail more, allowing the married couples to begin experiencing some divine delights. They then can withdraw naturally from the carnal pleasures, which they now consider less important. This way the married are also purified and reach Paradise by way*

flesh to the spirit. If they struggle to live spiritually, with the guidance of their Spiritual Father, little by little, they will begin to taste higher delights – spiritual and heavenly ones – and they won't seek the carnal ones. They have an obligation to struggle to practice temperance, so as to not impart these carnal passions to their children. You see, young children whose parents have a heightened carnal frame of mind, will, from a young age, also

of the more comfortable path with its gradual turns. Monastics, however, head straight up, climbing the mountain crags and reach Paradise.

You must keep in mind that the subject of conjugal relations is not a matter for you alone; you have no right to regulate it on your own by yourself, but rather 'by agreement' according to Saint Paul (1 Cor 7:5). Even when this consensus is reached, there is need for careful attention. The strong must take the position of the weak. Many times, to prevent disappointing one another, one may reluctantly agree, but are internally tormented. This may occur particularly in women who have little fear of God and strong carnal instincts. Many times, because they are not discerning, some pious men, who have the consent of their wives, proceed thoughtlessly into a long period of abstinence, and then the women may be tormented and burst out in neurotic behaviour, and so on. Such men may imagine that their wives have advanced more in virtue and desire to live a more chaste life over longer periods of time. But this may open the way to temptation for the women and then, they desire friends. And when this happens, once having fallen, they are troubled by their conscience, while their husbands are still trying to live a more chaste life, believing that their wives are doing the same thing. This situation gives them the wrong impression because they think that they have advanced in the spiritual life and do not desire carnal pleasures. A natural cause of this may be the justified feminine pride and the envy of the women who feel inferior. The wife, seeing the husband desiring to live more spiritually, constrains herself and tries to outdo him.

Forgive me for entering into unknown vineyards, for the work of the monk is to pray with his komboschoini and not these delicate matters. But, so as not to distress you, I forced myself to respond to your concern by writing a few things (that I understand from afar), which torment our brothers and sisters in the world and give cause to the enemy. It is most important that both spouses be on the same level regarding their bodily constitution. When it happens that one is temperate and the other is more energetic, there is need for sacrifice on the part of the stronger toward the weaker, so that the weaker is aided to receive spiritual health gradually, and then, together, they can proceed." (See Fr D. Tatsis, *The Elder Paisios*, Konitsa 1995, pp. 176-178).

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have these inclinations, because they get their carnal mindset from their parents. At first, these passions are very slight, as are all hereditary passions – much like the stinging nettle, very soft at first and easy to touch, but extremely itchy when full-grown – and they can be cured by a good Spiritual Father who has discernment. If however, they are not treated at a young age, the children will need to struggle mightily when they are older in order to rid themselves of these passions.

Human reason in the will of God for childbearing

Oftentimes, couples tell me of their insecurities regarding the topic of childbearing, and ask for my opinion. Some only want one or two children, while others want to have many. However, it would be to their advantage to leave this matter of childbearing up to God, to entrust their life to divine providence and not set up their own plan. They must have faith that God, Who cares for the birds of the air, will care much more for their children. Once there was a sailor who married at the age of eighteen. He was poor and so was the girl he married. They rented a small basement apartment to live in. The wife also found a little work and they lived very frugally. Just imagine that for a table they were using a crate left over from some peaches they had once bought. Later they had children, living very thriftily in order to raise them. And yet, little by little, they became prosperous homeowners.

Some couples try to take care of everything else before they start to think about having children. They don't consider God in the least. Again, some others say: "Life

is hard enough today; you can barely raise one child", and they don't go on to have other children. Of course, they don't realise how sinful this kind of thinking is because they do not entrust themselves to God. God is compassionate and merciful: as soon as He sees that they can't cope, it's not hard for Him not to give them more children.

So many people go into marriage without considering that they should also plan on having children and raising them in a Christian manner. They don't want a lot of children so they won't have to be bothered; instead they have dogs and cats in their homes... I was told that some people now[5] in America, instead of having a dog at home, have some kind of pig, which is very expensive and doesn't grow to be too big. They've made the pigs that way so they can keep them in their homes. They don't want to have children because it's a pain to wash and care for them, and instead they're cleaning after piggies! At least a dog can keep watch. But, to have pigs in the house? Now this is too much!

In Australia[6] I saw a nursing home for elderly dogs and cats ... even a cemetery for animals! The way people are going, they'll be raising mice to make cat food and rabbits for dog food while other people are dying of hunger. Nowadays, if someone were to kill a dog, he might actually get into more trouble than if he were to kill another person. Of course, depending on whose dog

5. It was said in 1990.

6. The Elder travelled to Australia in 1977, after being invited by the Church to go and give spiritual help to the Greek Orthodox people there.

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it was... Just look at where we've come to! A man is worth less than a dog in our days.

And I'm also amazed by what some Spiritual Fathers say these days. Sometime ago some pilgrims came to the *Kalyvi* and asked me, "Geronda, does Saint John Chrysostom write anywhere that married couples should not have children?" "What are you talking about? Where did you hear such a thing?" I asked. "Well, Father So-and-So told us," they replied. So I got a hold of that Father and asked him "Did you say such a thing?" "Yes", he replied. "Where did you find that written?" I asked him. "Saint John Chrysostom mentions it in his *Homily on Virginity*," he said! "Look," I responded, "I haven't read Saint John Chrysostom, but I do know that the Saint cannot be saying something like that; he must be saying something else. Bring the book here and let me see what he has written." He brought the book and showed me the passage. I read and saw that the Saint had written the following: "*Now the number of people has increased, and you are also given the chance to live in virginity; it is not like the days of old when it was a necessity to have descendents*."[7] So, clearly, Saint John Chrysostom is not saying "*do not procreate children*"; and yet the Father insisted he was right! Imagine, a priest who's also a theologian saying such things! He wanted to show off that he had read Chrysostom and written dissertations; and he was even considered to be a good Spiritual Father! Can you imagine what harm these erroneous interpretations do to people who are just looking to find some comfort for their concerns?

7. See Saint John Chrysostom, *On Virginity IZ*, PG 48, 546.

Nowadays, a family is something meaningless for a lot of people who lead a secular life. This is why they either don't get married, or they do get married and don't have any children, or they kill the children through abortions, thus wiping out their whole kin by themselves. They are self-destructive; they are not destroyed by God. However, the faithful who keep the commandments of God receive Divine Grace, because God is somehow obligated to help them through the difficult years in which we live. And we see Christian families all around us with as many children as God has given them, raising them with the fear of God in their hearts. And all the children are well-balanced, joyful, a blessing from God, and they progress in life. Just when we are about to say, "What is the world coming to?", we see now a new, good generation going forward with the Grace of God. Yes, the devil may destroy, but the Good God is also at work and will not allow our human race to be annihilated.

Difficulties in childbearing

– Geronda, if a woman is not Orthodox, and if she is unable to conceive children, is she allowed to wear the belt which we have blessed on the sacred relics of Saint Arsenios?[8]

– Does she believe in the power of the Saint, or does she think that the belt will help her in some kind of magical way? If she believes in the Saint, then she can wear it.

8. As referred to in his biography, Saint Arsenios would bless a little rope and give it to the wife to wear as a way of overcoming infertility. The Elder had advised us in similar situations to bless a ribbon on the relics of Saint Arsenios and to give it to women who had trouble conceiving.

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For some women who aren't able to have children, the spiritual laws[9] may be in effect, because they didn't start a family when they should have. They get very picky (about who to wed): "No, he has this problem; no, he has that problem." Then they promise to marry someone, but they keep on looking for others. Then they say "no" to the one they had originally promised to marry, and he, instead of seeing it as a blessing that she left him before they get married, goes and commits suicide. Well then, what kind of family is such a woman to make? Other women aren't able to have children because they lived a very unruly life in their younger years. Some may even be affected by the food they eat. Many foods contain a lot of chemicals and hormones.

There are some couples who want to have children as soon as they get married; and if the child doesn't come right away, they get very anxious. But how are they going to have a child if they are full of agony and anxiety? If they get rid of the agony and the anxiety and put their life in good spiritual order, then they will have a child. Sometimes God intentionally delays the gift of a child to a couple. Look at Saints Joacheim and Anna, the holy Ancestors, and the Prophet Zacharias and Saint Elizabeth. In both cases, they were given a child in their old age in order to fulfil God's eternal will for the salvation of mankind.

Couples should always be ready to accept the will of God in their life. Whoever entrusts his life to God, God will not abandon. We do nothing and look at how much God does for us! He gives us all things with so much

9. In reference to this, see the 4th Chapter of Part 5.

love and generosity! Is there anything which God cannot do? One couple had five children, but when their children grew up, they settled far away from them, leaving their parents alone. So they decided to have another child to have as a companion in their old age. And even though the wife was at an age where it was not humanly possible to conceive, they had great faith in God and in time were blessed with a son. So they raised their youngest son, caring for him and having him near them in their old age.

The issue of childbearing is not dependent only on people; it depends upon God as well. When God sees humility in a couple who's having trouble conceiving, He won't just give them one child; He might even give them many children. However, when He sees stubbornness and egoism, if He grants their request, it would only "grant" their stubbornness and egoism. They must place themselves entirely into the hands of God and say, "My Lord, You care for us and for our good; *Thy will be done*."[10] Then what they ask for will be done. Because when we say, "*Thy will be done*," and wholly surrender ourselves to God, it is then that the will of God is indeed done. But we, on one hand, say, "*Thy will be done*," and on the other hand, keep persisting in our own will. Well, what is God supposed to do then?

Cases of childlessness

– Geronda, a husband and wife who both have Cooley's Anaemia asked us if they should try to have children. We told them to ask their Spiritual Father.

10. Mt 6:10.

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– Spiritual Fathers cannot tell such couples not to have children. What they can do is help these couples to cultivate *philotimo*, so that they can struggle to abstain, and with discernment, to use economy (to be lenient if necessary) with them on this matter.

– Geronda, there are couples who can't have any children, although they live very spiritually and want to become parents.

– God does not give children to a lot of people so that they will love all the children of the world as their own and help them achieve their spiritual regeneration. Once there was a man without children of his own, but whenever he walked out of his house, all the children of his neighbourhood would run to him and surround him with incredible love; they wouldn't let him leave and go to work! You see, God didn't give him his own children, but He graced him with the blessing of being loved as a father by all the children in neighbourhood, and enabled him to help them spiritually. The judgments of God are fathomless.

Again, in some cases God may not give children, so that an orphaned child might be helped. I once met a good Christian man who was a lawyer. At one point, as I was passing through his city, I paid him a visit, and with his great benevolence, he compelled me to stay and receive hospitality at his house. I also met his wife who had virtues similar to his. From the wife I learned of the spiritual life of the husband, and from the husband I learned of the spiritual state of the wife. Later, I learned more about both from the many Christians who knew them and who had been the recipients of their benefactions. This man of God practiced law with honesty. When he saw

that someone was a swindler, not only did he not take his case, he would also sharply admonish him to come to his senses. If he saw a guilty person who had repented, he tried to reconcile things or reduce the sentence. If he met a poor man who had been wronged, he wouldn't take any money and would try to vindicate him in court.

As he lived a very simple life, the little money he made was enough for him to live on and to provide help to poor families. The home of this faithful lawyer was literally a spiritual oasis in the "Sahara" of the city. The poor, the wounded, the jobless, those with family problems – they would all gather at his home, and he would support them all as a good father. He also had acquaintances in various positions and whomever he telephoned to assist, for example, someone get a job or someone who was ill, never told him 'no,' because everyone loved and respected him.

His wife also worked in a similar way. She would help poor children or students who had difficulties with their school work. They all thought of her as a mother. At one point in our conversation, she opened up and expressed a complaint to me: "Father, when I got married," she told me, "I gave up my work as a teacher, so I could become a dedicated mother. I asked of Christ to grant me even twenty children, but unfortunately, He didn't give me even one." So then I told her, "You, my dear sister, have more than five hundred children, and still you are complaining? Christ has seen your good intention and will reward you for it. Now that you're helping so many children with their spiritual regeneration, you have become a better mother than many other mothers and even outdo mothers who have many children.

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You will also receive a greater reward because with the spiritual regeneration, these children are secured for the eternal life." In the meantime they had adopted a girl and signed over their inheritance to her. She cared for them in their old age; and when they reposed, she went to a monastery – even though their home was like a monastery, as they read all the services. During Vespers and *Apodeipno*[11] they were accompanied by other brethren in Christ, but Midnight Prayers and the *Orthros* (Matins) they read alone, just the three of them. These blessed souls brought comfort and consolation to many suffering souls. May God also grant them a blessed repose.

This is why I say that the greater and better "parents" of big families are those people who are spiritually reborn and who help in the spiritual regeneration of children all over the world, to secure their souls for Paradise.

– Geronda, some couples who aren't able to have children of their own decide to adopt a child.

– Yes, it is better to adopt. They must not persist in having a child of their own. What man desires is not always what God desires.

– Geronda, should the adoptive parents tell their children at some particular age that they have adopted them?

– Well, it is better if they do tell the child at some point in time. But what matters most is to deeply and truly love the child. There are children who live with their biological parents but love other people more, because their parents don't have real love for them.

11. The Church service after dinner.

Large families

God especially loves and provides for large families. A large family provides children with many opportunities to grow up normally, as long as the parents give them the proper nurturing. One child helps the other. The oldest girl helps the mother; the second child takes care of the younger one, and so forth. There is a sense of giving and they live in an atmosphere of sacrifice and love. The younger ones love and respect the older ones; and this is something that comes naturally in a large family.

That's why parents who have only one or two children must be very careful about how they raise them. Usually they try to provide them with everything; therefore, the children believe everything is theirs. This kind of abundance is detrimental to the child's proper upbringing. For example, take a girl who's an only child and has everything. She has a maid who prepares her meal on time, who cleans up her room, and so forth. The maid is paid for her work, but the maid is also cultivated in a way because she offers a service – she gives of herself, while the girl, unless she makes some sacrifices, will remain uncultivated and spoiled. I like to advise young people to choose a marriage mate who comes from a large family, because those who grow up with economic hardships are used to sacrifice since they have always thought about how to help their family. This is something that is seldom found in spoiled children.

Also, the parents of large families tend to have a generous heart. I remember, during the time of the German Occupation of Greece, there was an orphaned child in our neighbourhood who was completely alone in the world.

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One poor family man with ten children of his own felt sorry for the orphan, took him home and raised him together with his own children. Now imagine what blessings he received from God! Would God ever leave a man like that, with such great *philotimo*, to go unassisted?

Of course, a man with a large family may in the beginning encounter difficulties, but God will not abandon him. Let me tell you about a family: There was a man with six children who asked me to pray that the landlord would not ever ask them to leave the house they were renting. Unfortunately, there are many landlords who gladly rent their homes to families with two people and a dozen dogs and cats, but refuse to rent to large families because they fear the children will destroy the house. Anyway, this poor family man had grown tired of being asked to leave one house after another; of being refused housing; of having to move from one house to another carrying around his children and his whole household. He worked hard to earn a living and provide for his family, and he gladly paid the rent without complaint, as long as they let him stay a few years to avoid the frequent moves. I felt pain for him when I heard his story and I told him: "Do not worry; God has written your children on His account. He is the Creator who gives children the most important thing, their soul, while you and your wife, as co-creators, give them their bodies. So, you see, God is more concerned about your children than you are."

Two or three months later he returned, very happy, and said, "Glory be to God! He has provided a home for us, and I even have money to spare!" I asked him what had happened, and he explained: "While I was waiting at the station for the bus to go to my village, I was approached

by a man selling lottery tickets. Now, being a Christian, as a rule I don't buy lottery tickets; so I told him that I didn't want any. But when I saw him leaving, it occurred to me that he may be in great need. So I called him back, took out some money and paid for one ticket but without taking it. He, being an honourable man, wouldn't accept this. Again I was troubled, and because I wanted to help him, I said to him, "All right, give me one ticket; maybe I'll need it." So I bought one ticket, thinking that this may upset me a little for breaking my rule, but it will make him happy. That one lottery ticket won a large sum of money. I bought a home and even had money left over to raise my children. Then, I found out where the lottery salesman lived and I went and placed in his mailbox an envelope with a large amount of money, knowing full well that he would not take it from me in person." It is amazing how the love of God works for those who have *philotimo*!

Abortion is a terrible sin

– Geronda, a forty-year-old woman who already has grown children, is now three months pregnant. Her husband is threatening to divorce her if she does not have an abortion.

– If she has an abortion, it will be her other children who will pay the price with sicknesses and accidents. Today, parents kill children with abortions and they do not have the blessing of God. In the past, if children were born sick, they were baptised, and died as angels, and were better secured. The parents had other healthy children and the blessing of God. Now healthy children are

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killed with abortions while other, sick children are kept alive. Parents will desperately go to England or America to find a cure for a child. And then children continue to be born with more debilitating illnesses, because, even if these ill children should live and have a family of their own, they will also bear unhealthy children. However, if they bore at least a few children, then they would not be so overwhelmed with the thought of saving that one unhealthy child. That child would die and go to Heaven as an angel.

– Geronda, I read somewhere that each year, fifty million abortions are performed in the world and two hundred thousand women die as a result of the abortions they had.[12]

– They kill the children, claiming that, if the world population increases, there won't be enough food to feed everyone. But there is so much uncultivated land, so many forests that, with the means available today, can easily and quickly be turned into olive groves, and given to those without land. It's not as if forest trees will be destroyed and cause a shortage of oxygen; other fruit-bearing trees will be planted in their place. In America they burn the wheat, and here in Greece massive amounts of fruit are thrown in landfills, while in Africa people are dying of hunger. When the people in Ethiopia were starving to death because of a drought, I had asked a ship-owner I knew, one who helps in such circumstances, to load his ship with the surplus fruit being destroyed and take it to them. In no way were they willing to give him the fruit.

12. It was spoken in 1989.

Thousands of embryos are killed each day! Abortion is a terrible sin. It is murder and indeed a very grave form of murder, for these are unbaptised children who are being killed. Parents must understand that life begins at the moment of conception.

One night God allowed me to have a terrible vision which enlightened me about this matter. It was the night of Tuesday of Bright Week after *Pascha*. I had lit two candles in two small tin cans, as I usually do, even when I am sleeping, for all those who suffer spiritually and physically, both the living and the departed. At midnight, as I was saying the Jesus Prayer, I saw a great field that was enclosed by a stone wall and planted with wheat that was just beginning to grow. I was standing outside of the field lighting candles for the dead and setting them up on the stone wall. To the left was a barren place, filled with rocks and cliffs, which were constantly vibrating with the echoes of thousands of deafening, heart-rending voices. Even the most hard-hearted of people would be shaken if they heard those voices. While I suffered listening to these heart-rending voices and was wondering where they came from and what the meaning of the vision was, I heard a voice saying to me: "The field with the planted wheat which has not yet ripened is the cemetery of the souls of the dead who will be resurrected. The rocky place being shaken by the heart-rending voices is the place where the souls of the aborted children are." Following that vision, I found it impossible to recover from the great pain I experienced for the souls of those children. Neither could I lie down nor could I rest, even though I was extremely tired that day.

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– Geronda, can something be done to remove the law regarding abortions?

– Yes, but both the State and the Church have to act on this matter so the public is better informed on all the serious consequences, including the drop in the birth rate. The priests must explain to the people that the law on abortions violates the commandments of the Gospel. The medical community must also inform the people from their perspective about the dangers involved in having an abortion. You see, the Europeans had a certain "nobility" which they bequeathed to their children. We had the fear of God, but we lost it and did not bequeath it to the next generation, and this is why now we have legalized abortions, civil marriages, and so forth.

When a person disobeys a commandment of God, only that person is responsible to Him. But when something which goes against the commandments of the Gospel is made into law by the State, then the wrath of God comes upon the whole nation in order to be pedagogically taught a spiritual lesson.

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CHAPTER TWO

The Role of the Mother in Raising Children

A mother's love

Geronda, you once told us that people grow and mature with love.

– It isn't enough to merely love another; we must love the other more than ourselves. A mother loves her children more than she loves herself. She will stay hungry to feed her children, yet she feels greater pleasure than they do. The children are fed materially, but she is fed spiritually. They experience the taste of food, while she experiences spiritual rejoicing.

A young girl, before she marries, may sleep until ten in the morning and have her breakfast prepared by her mother. She may be too lazy to do even the slightest chores. She wants everything at her beck and call. She has expectations from her mother, expectations from her father, while she sits at her ease. And although she is capable of loving, this ability is not developed because she's constantly receiving help and blessings from her mother, her father, her siblings. However, from the mo-

ment she becomes a mother, she resembles a little engine that the harder it works, the more it is recharged, because love works constantly. Before, she hated to touch anything unclean, and she used aromatic soaps to wash herself. But after she becomes a mother, when you see how she cleans her soiled child, oh, you would think she's touching marmalade; she's not repulsed by anything. Before, if she was woken up early, she yelled because she was annoyed. Once she becomes a mother, when her child cries, she stays up all night without complaint. She rejoices in taking care of her child. Why? For she is no longer a child. She became a mother; sacrifice and love have come into her life.

Indeed, a mother comes to attain a greater love and sacrifice than the father, because the father is not given many opportunities to sacrifice himself for the children. A mother toils more with the children; she is tormented, but at the same time, she is recharged by them. She gives and gives and as a result, she also receives. A father doesn't weary himself as much with the children, nor is he recharged; so his love is not equal to that of a mother's.

How many mothers come crying to me, begging "Father, please pray for my child." They have such agony! Few are the men who will come and tell me, "Father, please pray for my child who's gone astray." Just today a very anxious mother came here, fussing over her children – she had eight of them – putting them all in line to receive a blessing. Only with difficulty would a father have done that. Russia survived because of the mothers. A paternal embrace, when it lacks the Grace of God, is dry; but a maternal embrace, even without God in it, has milk. A child loves his father and respects him, but it is

with the tender love of the mother that the love for his father grows.

The advantage of childlessness

A childless woman is tormented when she doesn't spiritually cultivate this matter. Oh, what I had to go through once with a woman who did not have children! Her husband held an important position at his job. She owned apartments that she rented out; a large house in which they lived; a huge dowry and could not be bothered to go grocery shopping or to do the cooking – not that she knew how to cook, however. She would just call for delivery. She lacked for nothing and yet she was tormented because nothing ever pleased her. All day long she sat in her home, finding fault with one thing and then another; being bored of one thing, then another. Her mind was overwhelmed by racing thoughts, and she had to take pills in order to calm down. Her husband would bring work home to keep her company; and she would hover over his head just to pass the time. He had grown tired of her habits, but then again the poor man had to keep up with his work. When I met her I told her, "Don't stay in the house all day becoming mouldy. Go to a hospital and visit some of the sick." "Where should I go, Father? That seems difficult for me," she excused herself. "Then you will do the following: You will read the First Hour at the appropriate time, the Third Hour at its time,[1] and so forth,

1. The Prayer Service of the Hours is conducted to sanctify the times into which the day had been divided during the Roman times. The First Hour was at 6:00 a.m., the Third Hour was at 9:00 a.m., the Sixth Hour was at noon, and the Ninth Hour was at 3:00 p.m.

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and you will do prostrations." But again she told me, "I cannot do this, Father." "Well, then perhaps you can read the *Lives of the Saints*." I advised her to read the lives of female saints, thinking that she might derive some help from them. I had my work cut out for me – getting her into a routine, so that she would not end up in an insane asylum. She had become entirely useless. A strong machine, whose oils were frozen.

What I'm trying to say with all of this is that a woman's heart becomes idle when the love she has inside of her doesn't have anywhere to go. And then you see another woman with five, six, or eight children who is so poor and yet so glad. She is upstanding and courageous. Why? Because she has found her purpose in life. I was impressed by another situation: A friend of mine had two sisters. The one got married young and had many children. She was always sacrificing. She sewed and helped the poor with good works. She recently came and said to me, "I have grandchildren now!" and her heart was leaping with joy. The other sister didn't marry, didn't even take advantage of her care-free life spiritually, and had become … well, don't ask! A useless thing. She couldn't be bothered to live her life; expected her aged mother to serve her, and still complained. Do you see what happens? The change did not come about in her because she didn't become a mother; nor did she take advantage of the love that exists naturally in women by helping others in need.

This is why I say that a woman must possess the spirit of sacrifice. You see, if a man doesn't cultivate the virtue of love, he doesn't suffer great damage. If a woman fails to convey the love she naturally has, then she is like a machine that works – but one without the material to

work (properly), so that it jolts about, jolting everyone else about.

A mother's endurance

– Geronda, in one of his letters to the nuns, Saint Nectarios writes that they mustn't forget they are women and that they should strive to imitate the female saints and not the male saints.[2] Why does he say this? Is it because women do not have much endurance?

– Who doesn't have endurance? Women? I have come to fear them! No, women have great endurance. Physically a woman may not be as strong as a man, but with the heart she has – if she puts it to proper use – she can outdo the strength of most men. Sure, a man has great physical strength, but he doesn't have the heart of a woman. I noticed a cat that came to the *Kalyvi* with its kittens. It was very skinny, its belly completely flat. One day a big hunting dog came, and Kourdis, the male cat, ran away. But the mother cat got up, arched her back, and became fierce; she was ready to pounce on the dog. I wondered at where it had found such courage! You see, it had its kittens to defend.

A mother feels pain; she gets tired; but she feels neither the pain nor the tiredness. She pushes herself to do everything, but because she loves her children and she loves her home, she does everything with joy. Someone who is constantly resting gets more tired than she does. I remember, when we were young, my mother had to car-

2. Saint Nectarios, Bishop of Pentapolis, *Thirty-five Pastoral Letters*, Letter 26, ed. Hypakoe, Athens 1993, p.123.

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ry water from the well that was very far away from our home. She had to cook, bake, wash the clothes and even go to the fields. In other words, she did all the chores, and even had us children driving her crazy, and on top of that, she had to be the fair judge whenever we fought. But she used to say, "This is my duty; I'm required to do all these things without complaining." She said this in the good sense. She truly loved her house; she loved her children, and she did not tire with the chores; she did everything with her heart, with joy.

And as the years go by, a mother will love her home all the more. Even though she grows older, she sacrifices herself all the more, even to raise her grandchildren. And because she does this with her heart – although her strength has diminished – she seems to have more endurance than her husband, and even more endurance than she had in her youth.

– And in times of illness, Geronda, women have greater composure than men.

– Do you know what happens? A mother has faced her children's illnesses many times, so she's quite experienced. She remembers how many times a child's temperature rose and how it fell in time. She's dealt with all kinds of situations – her child choking, or fainting – she knows that with a slap or two that the child will come around. The father, on the other hand, doesn't see these kinds of situations often, and doesn't have such experience. This is why, should he see his child at some point with a fever or a little pale, he panics: "We are losing the child! What are we to do? Run, call the doctor!"

Pregnancy and breast-feeding

The nurturing of a child begins with pregnancy. If a pregnant mother is agitated and worried, the embryo she's carrying in her womb is agitated. If the mother prays and lives a spiritual life, the child in her womb is sanctified. This is the reason why a pregnant woman should say the Jesus Prayer, study the Gospel, chant hymns and not be anxious, while others should also be careful not to upset her. Then, the child that will be born will be blessed, and the parents will have no problems, neither when the child is young, nor when the child is older.

After the birth, a mother should breast-feed her child for as long as she can. A mother's milk provides a healthy base for the children. Children who breast-feed aren't only receiving milk, they are receiving love, tenderness, consolation, security – all of which contribute to developing a strong character. Breast-feeding is also beneficial for the mother. A mother who doesn't breast-feed her baby may develop anomalies that can lead to mastectomy.

In the past, some mothers would even breast-feed the baby of another woman who didn't have milk. Nowadays many mothers can't be bothered to breast-feed their own children. The mother that is lazy and doesn't breast-feed her child transmits laziness to her child as well. In the past, condensed milk cans featured a picture of a mother holding a baby in her arms. Now they show a mother holding a bouquet of flowers. Mothers no longer breast-feed their babies, therefore the children grow up without consolation. Who will give them tenderness and love? A can of evaporated cow's milk? Their heart is chilled

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as they're fed from a "chilled" bottle. Later, when they grow up, they look for consolation in a bottle, in bars. They drink to forget their anxiety and become alcoholics. If children don't receive tenderness, they won't have any to pass on to their children – it becomes a cycle. Then the mothers come to me and cry, "Father, pray! I am losing my child!"

The working mother

– Geronda, is it correct for a mother to work?

– What does her husband say about this?

– Whatever she's comfortable with.

– A young woman who has gone to college and started her career before her marriage does not easily give up her career when she becomes a mother in order to devote herself to her children. However, another young woman who has not gone to college and holds a simple job will find it easier to leave her job.

– If she doesn't have any children, Geronda, I think that having a job will be helpful to her.

– Are you saying that if she doesn't have any children, she has to have a career? There are so many other things that she can do. Of course, if she does have children, it would be best if she stayed at home. Otherwise, how can the children be helped?

– Geronda, many women say that they can't make ends meet and that's why they have to work.

– Well, they can't make ends meet because they want to have a television, a video player, their own car, household help, and so on. In that case, of course they have to work, but then they neglect their children and eventually

lose them. If the father is the only one working and they are content with having less, then there will be no problem. But with both parents working, in order to supposedly make ends meet, the family is scattered and loses its true meaning. What can the children do? If families lived a little simpler, they would be less tired, and the children would be happier. There was a man who knew seven languages, and his wife was struggling to learn four. She even taught language lessons, although she had to take pills, just in order to keep up. Their children were born healthy, but grew up damaged. And then they had to see psychologists... This is why I tell mothers to simplify their lives in order to spend more time caring for their children who need them. They can also have some other activity to do at home when they get a little tired with the children. When the mother is at home, she can closely watch after her children, regulate family life and avoid many problems and worries.

Nowadays children can't get enough maternal love. They don't even learn their maternal tongue because the mother is absent all day at work, and leaves her children with foreign women. Children left at nurseries, where at least there's a dedicated nurse who will show them some loving care, are a thousand times better off than children who have been abandoned by their parents who have paid some woman to look after them. You know what they say... Whoever didn't have a mother, had many nannies!

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The household and the spiritual life of the mother

– Geronda, how can a housewife regulate her housework so she can have time for prayer? In other words, what ratio should there be between house chores and prayer?

– Women usually have no sense of moderation when it comes to household chores. They're constantly finding things to do. While they do have a lot of heart and could do much "housecleaning" in their soul, they often waste their heart on insignificant things. Let's say we have a delicate glass with very intricate designs. Now, if this glass didn't have all these designs on it, it would still serve its purpose as a glass. But no, women go to the store and start: "No, I want the designs up higher, to this point; no, not this way, the other way..." And if there should be some floral details on it, well then the heart really starts leaping! But by doing this, women lay waste to all their energy and potential. You'll hardly find a man paying so much attention to such details. For example, a man will hardly notice if a lamp shade is brown or black. But a woman wants something beautiful and she rejoices in it; she gives a part of her heart to this, a part to that, and then what is left for Christ? Only a tired yawn is spared for the time of prayer. The more a woman distances her heart from material things, the closer she comes to Christ. And when her heart is given to Christ, then she acquires great strength. Just the other day I saw a soul who had dedicated herself entirely to God. You could almost see a sweet light burning within her. She deals with everything in a gentle and warm way. She used to be very worldly, but

she had a good disposition and at some point the spark was kindled within her. Gold, fine clothing – she threw it all away. Now she lives very simply. She struggles to live a spiritual life. Her spirit of sacrifice is remarkable. She has become envious of the saints – in the good sense. What attentive effort to the Jesus Prayer, what fasting, what reading of the Psalms! It is amazing! She is now nurtured by her ascetic efforts.

– Geronda, a mother told me, "My body is very weak and I get very tired; I don't even have time to finish my chores, let alone say my prayers properly."

She has to simplify her life so that she can have time to pray. A mother can make great progress through simplicity. If a mother has simplified her life but still gets tired because she has many children, then, yes, she is entitled to say, "I am tired." But if she wearies herself trying to make the house look good for the guests, well then, what can we say? Some mothers, in order to keep the house tidy, asphyxiate the children, confining them to one part of the house and don't allow them to move a single chair or pillow. They impose a military type of discipline and, while the children are born fine, they grow up damaged. A wise and discriminating person, seeing an immaculate home with many children, will come to the conclusion that either the children are damaged, or the mother is barbarian and imposes military discipline. There is fear in these children's hearts – and for this reason, they are obedient. Once I had gone to visit the home of a large family. I was so pleased to see the children with their childish naughtiness spoiling the worldly order of things – which requires having everything in its place. That is the greater disorder which wearies contemporary man.

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In the past, there weren't that many spiritual books available for a mother to read and be helped. Today, even though there are many Patristic texts and a lot of translated works available, unfortunately most mothers are either preoccupied with foolish things or they work in order to make ends meet.

It's better for a mother to be involved with the nurturing of her children, rather than being overly involved with household chores and inanimate objects. A mother can speak to her children about Christ; she can read the *Lives of the Saints* to them. Thus, at the same time she will be occupying herself dusting off her own soul so that it will be spiritually shiny. The mother's spiritual life will then quietly help the souls of her children. Thus, her children will live happily, and she will be joyful because she will have Christ within her. If a mother doesn't find the time to even say a simple *Trisagion*,[3] how can she expect her children to be sanctified?

– But Geronda, what if a mother has a lot of children and a lot of work to do?

– When she does her housework, can't she pray at the same time? It was my mother who taught me to say the Jesus Prayer. When we were children and had done some mischief, and my mother was about to get angry with us, I remember her saying, "*Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.*" When she put the bread in the oven, she would say, "In the name of Christ and *Panaghia*." And whenever she was kneading or cooking, again, she constantly said the Jesus Prayer. In this manner, she herself was blessed,

3. *Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal One, have mercy upon us.*

as were the bread and the food she was preparing, and so were those who partook of it later.

There are so many mothers who led a holy life and had holy children! For example, the mother of Elder Hadji-Georgis. Even the milk of this blessed mother who nursed Gabriel (This was the worldly name of Elder Hadji-Georgis.) was ascetic! She had two children and afterwards, lived with her husband in purity, loving one another as siblings. She had an ascetic spirit from early on, as she was inspired by her sister who was an ascetic nun. She would go and visit her sister and later would take her children with her. Gabriel's father was also a pious man who worked as a merchant, which required him to spend most of his time away, on trips for his business. This gave his mother the opportunity to live simply, not to be "*anxious and troubled about many things*,"[4] and to take Gabriel with her when she went with other women for vigils in the caves or country chapels. This is the reason why he later achieved such holiness.[5]

The mother's devotion has great significance. If the mother has humility and fear of God, then family life is smooth. I know young mothers whose faces shine, even though they have no one to help them. I can understand a mother's spiritual state by looking at the children.

4. Cf. Lk 10: 41.

5. See Elder Paisios of Mount Athos, *Elder Hadji-Georgis the Athonite (1809-1886)*, Holy Monastery "Evangelist John the Theologian", Souroti, Thessaloniki.

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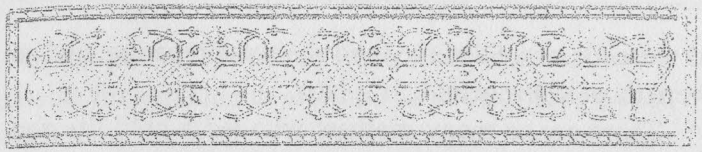

CHAPTER THREE

Η ευθύνη των γονέων για την ανατροφή των παιδιών

The Parents' Responsibility for Raising Their Children

Parents should entrust their children to God

God gave the first-created humans, Adam and Eve, the great blessing to become His co-creators. From then on, the parents, the grandparents, and so forth, are also God's co-creators, because they create the body of the child.

In a way, God is obligated to care for the children. When a child is baptised, God sends an Angel for the child's protection. So then, the child is protected by God, by the Guardian Angel and by the parents. The Guardian Angel is always by the child, helping. The more a child grows and matures, the more the parents are relieved of their duties and responsibilities. Should the parents die, God – both from on high and from close by – and also the Guardian Angel, from close by, continue – always – to protect the child.

Parents have to help their children spiritually when they are little, because then, even their faults are little and

they can easily be corrected. It's like a fresh potato; if you scratch it a little, it's peeled. If, however, it gets older and staler, you will need a sharp knife to clean it; and if it has some dark spots, you'll need to dig deeper. If the children are filled with Christ from an early age, they will always remain close to Him. And even if they should stray a little when they grow up, either because of a phase of rebellion they're going through or because of bad influences, they are sure to return to their senses. This is because the fear of God and the devotion that watered their hearts when they were young cannot ever be eradicated.

Later, during adolescence – until they have gotten their children educated and settled – the struggle of the parents will become greater. Parents should do all they can to help them at this age and leave all that is beyond their power in the hands of Almighty God. When parents entrust their children to God, then God is obligated to help on matters which are not humanly possible. If, for example, the children are disobedient, the parents should entrust them to God and not try to pressure them in any way. The mother should say in prayer, "My Lord, my children won't listen to me. I can't do anything to help them. Please, take care of them."

The other day at the vigil, I was impressed by a mother I knew from some time ago. She came to greet me. I saw that she had with her only the older children. "Where are the little ones?" I asked. "At home, Geronda. We wanted to be here for the vigil and my husband and I spoke about it, saying that God will provide a Guardian Angel for them; after all, we are going to a vigil, not for a night out." Nowadays, one rarely meets such confidence in God because now, just as the children's confidence in

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their parents has diminished, so has the parents' confidence in God. Many parents have often been heard to say, "Why should our child take up the wrong way of life? We go to church." But they do not offer the screwdriver to Christ to tighten up ... some of the screws in their children; they want to do everything by themselves. And even though there is God Who protects the children and the Guardian Angel, who himself stands constantly by to protect them as well, the parents agonise over them until they become sick themselves. And, although they are faithful people, they act as if there is no God, as if there is no Guardian Angel, in which case they actually impede divine intervention. Instead they must become humble and ask for God's help, and the good God will protect the children.

The spiritual regeneration of children

– Geronda, are only the parents responsible for a child's upbringing?

– Parents are the ones who are primarily responsible, because – depending on the kind of upbringing which they will give their children, some will grow up to be good priests, others good teachers and so forth; and they will in turn help their own children and those of other people. The mother has greater responsibility than the father when it comes to raising children.

If the parents pray and lead a spiritual life during the time the child is still in the mother's womb, the child will be born sanctified. And in turn, if they continue to help the child spiritually, that child will become a blessed and sanctified person who will help others in society, either

through service in the Church or through public work. We all have to help the children so that they can become good people, and so that a little good yeast will remain intact for the generations to come. Because now, the way things are going, even the yeast will be lost. And if the yeast is lost, then what will happen?

Those parents who have been delivered of children, having given them their bodies, must also contribute – as best they can – to their spiritual rebirth. For, if a person is not regenerated spiritually, he is bound for hell. Also, that which parents cannot do themselves for their children should be entrusted to teachers. This is why our Church, in Her prayers, refers to "*our parents and our teachers*."[1] There are also the Spiritual Fathers who, although they may not have children of their own, can assist in a positive way with the upbringing of children since it is they who labour for the children's spiritual regeneration.

What I'm trying to say is that everyone should help the children, each person in his or her own way, with their good example, so that the children may be regenerated, live peacefully in this life and ultimately go to Paradise. When children become spiritual human beings, then they really don't need any rules or prohibitions. "*The law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient...*"[2] Laws are needed to limit and control the lawless. Spiritual authority is superior to any human authority.

1. See *The Great Horologion*, The Midnight Service, Short Dismissal, ed. Apostoliki Diakonia, Athens 1991, p. 24.
2. Cf. 1 Tim 1:9.

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The example of the parents

– Geronda, when their child disobeys and rebels, how should the parents act?

– For a child to be disobedient and to behave badly, something's wrong. It could be that he witnesses unpleasant scenes or hears quarrels either in or out of the house. In any case, in spiritual matters, children are helped chiefly by the example we set, not by force. In fact, the mother can help the most through her example, with her obedience to and respect for her husband. If she happens to have a difference of opinion with him on a particular subject, she should never express it in front of the children and give the devil rights to exploit the situation. She should never diminish the children's impression of their father. Even if he is wrong, she should excuse him. If, for example, he behaves badly, she can say to the children, "Your father is tired; he had to work very hard to finish something urgent. He's working hard for you."

A lot of parents fight in front of the children and set a bad example. The poor children are confused and saddened. Then the parents, in order to comfort them fulfil all their demands. The father cajoles the child saying, "Oh, my precious child, what would you like me to buy for you?" Then the mother cajoles the child as well, and in the end, the children grow up with antics, feigning things so that if the parents cannot give them whatever they ask for, they threaten to kill themselves.

I know how much the parents' good example helps the children. Just today, two little girls came – one was about three and the other about four years old – with their devout parents. I enjoyed them so much! They were like

little angels. They sat down and covered their little knees with their little dresses. They were so reserved, so respectful! And all this stemmed from the behaviour of the parents. When children see their parents have love and respect for one another, behaving with prudence, praying, and so on, then these positive images are imprinted on their soul. This is why I say that the best inheritance the parents can bestow upon their children is their own spiritual devotion.

Oh, I wish you could have seen this little girl in Australia,[3] what wonderful nobility of character she had! We were in Canberra. I had met with the last of the people who had come to see us, and soon we would be leaving. Just then a car pulled up and a couple got out with their little girl. "Geronda, we made it in time!" they said. "Yes," I replied, "we are leaving soon." So the husband said, "Geronda, it's all right if I don't see you, but please do see my wife; she is sensitive and needs to talk to you and find some consolation." I walked aside with the mother to hear what she wanted to tell me. The little girl ran behind her mother. I turned and said to the little girl, "Stay here and Mommy will be right back." But then she asked me, "Do you have a mommy?" "No, I don't," I told her. And then I saw her little eyes swell with tears. "Do you want me to give you my mommy?" she asked me. So then I asked her, "Do you have a grandfather?" "No," she said. "Do you want to have a grandfather?" "Yes, we do," she told me. "Do you want to stay in our house or do you want us to come to your house? Whatever you want," she assured me. What nobility! A little child ready

3. In 1979

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to offer her mother to me! You could see that she had imitated her parents. The father had a very noble and generous spirit. I embraced him, kissed him and congratulated him. I gave him many blessings too! Such people move even the most hard-hearted person; you can imagine how much more they move God!

Children should be filled with love and affection at home

A child needs a lot of love and affection, and much guidance. A child needs you to sit by his side, listen to his problems, caress him and kiss him. If a mother takes an upset and mischievous child into her arms to caress and kiss, the child will calm down. If the young child is filled with affection and love, later that child will be strong and able to face the problems of life.

Today, however, most children get to see their parents for just a little bit at night and don't get enough parental love. A lot of parents who are teachers or doctors and work mostly with children give their affection to other people's children, so when they return home, they're so worn out that they have no tenderness left for their own children. They are just too tired; the battery has run out. The father comes home, sits in his comfortable chair; opens the newspaper and doesn't spend any time with his children. His child comes near him and instead of speaking or caressing the child, he shoos the child away. Meanwhile, the mother is busy getting dinner ready and so neither can she spend some time with the children. When this becomes the norm, children grow up deprived of love.

One can see some military officers who, accustomed to imposing austere punishments upon their insubordinate soldiers, want to impose the same kind of military discipline in the family, treating their children harshly and even beating them for the smallest infraction. Or some people who work in the court system even hold trials at home if a child does something wrong. They don't treat their children with affection and love, and this is why they may have psychological problems later.

The suffering of children caused by parents

– Geronda, a mother asked us what to do with her daughter who swears at the *Panaghia*.

– She has to find the source of the evil. Sometimes in such cases, it is actually the parents who are at fault. When they do not behave appropriately, they do not help the children who, in turn, speak with impudence. Then they become susceptible to demonic influence and react badly. In other circumstances, again, the parents imagine that they can raise good children properly by force. Their egoism enters into the picture, and they speak to them with exasperation, whereas they should always treat their children with kindness.

Just today I got really angry with a woman. She has a child that she beats mercilessly. The poor thing is always shaking from fear and doesn't speak; his nerves are shattered. "He has demons," they tell her, so she leaves the child without food. "I don't feed him in order to get rid of the demon," she told me. "Are you in your right mind?" I asked her. "Give the child something to eat and try to get rid of the demons inside you! You're the cause

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of the child's problems. The child does not have any demons! He's just scared of you because you beat him! Do you take the child to Church for Holy Communion on a regular basis?" "No," she told me. Try communicating with her!

– Geronda, do people say that a child has a demon because that child sometimes swears?

– Of course the child swears! When the mother is so forceful, she practically drowns the child, even the child isn't aware afterwards of what he's done. It's a shame to have this child treated this way. It is the mother who is possessed, not the child.

In any case, we shall see strange things on the Day of Judgment! Back in the days of idolatry, mothers burned their children before the idol of Molech[4] so as to honour this pagan god.[5] What sacrifices they would make if they knew the read God! Those women will be judged leniently on the Day of Judgment because they were misled. But the present-day mothers, with the indifference they have for their children, what leniency can they possibly expect? God will say to them, "You knew the real God: you were baptised; you have heard so much; you have learned so much; God Himself was crucified to save you – and what did you do? You couldn't be bothered to take your children to Church to receive Holy Communion! Those women in Old Testament times believed that Molech was the true God and even offered their children as a sacrifice. You – what have you done?"

4. Molech was a Semitic deity. In the Old Testament, he is always referred to in relation to human sacrifice – particularly that of small children who were killed and burned before the idol of Molech.

5. Cf. Lev 18:21, 20: 2-4; 2 Kg 23:10, Jer 32:35 (39:35 LXX).

Children pay for the mistakes their parents make. Some parents destroy their children, but God is not unjust; He has great and special love for those children who have been wronged in this world either by their parents or by others. When parents are the reason why children take the wrong path in life, God will not abandon them, for they are entitled to divine help. God will provide so that the children are helped. For example, we see some young persons, even older ones, suddenly turn their lives around. I remember a certain case in point: There was a family with two children, a boy and a girl. The father, the mother and the daughter were atheists. The son at first got involved with Marxism. He wasn't comforted there, so he tried Hinduism. But he wasn't comforted there either and came to the Holy Mountain. He came often to the *Kalyvi* and also went to other *kellia*. Throughout this time, his parents kept saying, "My Christ, my *Panaghia*, protect our child". After staying at Mount Athos for some time and having recovered a bit and become spiritually strong, he returned home – for he was not suited to the monastic life – and helped both his parents spiritually. Now, I see his father is the first to come to vigils. He reads the Preamble Psalm[6] in church, and at home he reads the Vespers, the *Apodeipno* (Compline Service) and the *Paraklesis* (Supplication to the Mother of God). Now, this is God's providence at work! The devil tried to do harm, but God turned things around and brought everybody in line.

6. Ps 104 (LXX 103), which is read at the beginning of Vespers.

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– What happened to the girl, Geronda?

– She, too, is coming around gradually. God provides opportunities.

– Geronda, some parents who embarked on living a spiritual life at an advanced age regret that they didn't give their children a Christian upbringing when they were young.

– If they have true repentance and beseech God to help their children, God will do something for them; He will throw them a life-saver to help them escape the storm they're in. Even if they are no people who will appear in order to help or guide them, it may be that something they will see will contribute to turning their lives around and out of the storm. Keep in mind that those parents had good intentions, but they weren't helped by their family when they were young and so they're entitled to divine help.

– Geronda, some children live a spiritual life, but encounter many difficulties caused by their indifferent parents.

– Just as He does for orphans, God shows more care for these children than He does for those whose parents live a spiritual life.

Children are influenced by their surroundings

– Geronda, at what age do children receive influences by their surroundings?

– Children imitate their parents even from the cradle. They pick up everything they see the adults doing and record it on their empty "cassette tape". This is why parents should struggle to cut away their passions. It doesn't matter if some of these passions were inherited by them

from their own parents; they will still have to give an account to God, not only for not struggling to rid themselves of them, but also for being responsible in transmitting them to their children.

– Geronda, why is it that some children with the same upbringing at home turn out to be very different?

– Often a child will be influenced by the external environment. But when that child grows up, if he has a good disposition, God will give him greater enlightenment to understand the negative influences he has received and then, he will struggle to cast them off.

Nowadays, there is a pervasive evil in the world. People try to destroy children from a young age. Instead of preventing (putting the brakes on) them from (experiencing) what is evil – until they are of age – people actually prevent them from experiencing what is good as well. Later, the poor things, when they fall into sin and are tormented, want to stand up on their own two feet, but they don't know how. You see, once they go downhill, it's difficult for them to stop; going downhill is sweet. Young persons, in their mid-twenties come to the *Kalyvi* and tell me they're taking drugs and ask for help in overcoming the addiction. It happened once that I helped a couple of them to turn their lives around and now they bring their friend and the friend of their friend to be helped. They break your heart. One such young man was into very heavy drugs and was on the brink of death. His arms, his teeth were a mess. He managed to break the habit later and went on to help other young people. There were about fifteen young men in his company and each one who came to see me would say, "I'm with so and so..." They considered him their Elder! But so many have

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come so very close to death, using needles, selling their blood... They destroy themselves and they destroy their parents. And so you see the father dying from a stroke, the mother from a heart attack, liver disorder...

Love between siblings

Parents must cultivate love for one another between the children, in this way preparing the groundwork, so that when they wish to strengthen and support a weaker child, they will have the approval of the stronger sibling. In other words, they should help the stronger child understand that the other child indeed requires special attention. Justice is given from God and it must be rendered equally to both the older and the younger. To the older with respect, to the younger with love, without harm or partiality. This is also mentioned in the book of Deuteronomy.[7] If, for example, the older is at fault, we will justify the younger, without offending the older child in front of the younger one; but we will discuss the matter privately with him so that he will come to understand his fault.

– Geronda, how should one handle envy, which often appears in older children toward the younger ones?

– Envy is a passion. But when a child is only three years old and the mother is breast-feeding his newborn sibling, it is somewhat understandable that he is envious, since it was only a short while ago that he, too, was being nursed. Now he sees his little brother in his mother's arms and thinks to himself, "Just a little while ago my mother kept

7. Cf. Deut 1:17.

me in her arms, but now she's pushed me aside!" It's of great help if there's a grandmother around. But when the child becomes four years old, the envy should diminish. And when he is six, the mother can tell him: "You've become a big boy now. What kind of mother would hold such a big boy in her arms?" If the mother helps the child face this problem in this way, then he'll only run to his mother when there's a reason. It isn't healthy to have a child constantly holding on to his mother's skirt.

Friends greatly influence children

– Geronda, why is it that a young person who lived spiritually and had *philotimo* as a child comes to the point of going completely astray?

– Let's not be judgmental. There are many contributing factors. The children who live a worldly life, carelessly, are censured by their conscience when they see other children who live purely, spiritually, and they want to lead them astray. Once there were two children walking on the street. At some point, one of them stumbled and fell into a ditch of muddy water and his clothes got wet and muddy. As they went a little further, he pushed his friend into another ditch to get him wet and muddy, because he felt bad being dirty while his friend was clean.

Friends greatly influence children. When I was young, love was in my nature. I would start going somewhere with the animals and would want to put this one and that one on the donkey and to carry my little brother on my shoulder. Once one of my brothers killed a bird and I was very sad and scolded him. I then took the bird and buried it with tears. At that time, I was keeping company

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with children of my age. We would go into the woods; we would pray; we read the Lives of the Saints and we fasted. Later the mothers did not allow their children to keep company with me. "Don't keep company with him; he will infect you." So, they abandoned me and I felt lonely. They even made fun of me by saying, "There goes the monk; here comes the monk." They made my life a torment. It got to the point that I could no longer bear the taunts and the ridicule. Then I thought to myself, "I will go with the older children and act like them." I started keeping company with older boys. I made a slingshot like them. At first, I took aim with the slingshot alone. Then I used pellets and became the best shot. But later, when I killed a bird and saw it lying dead, I came to my senses again and recovered. I threw away the slingshot and the pellets and said to myself: "You cried when you saw your brother kill a bird and you scolded him for killing it, and now look at what you are doing! You're killing birds and eventually you'll be killing animals." Indeed, if I had continued, I would have started hunting animals, and learning to skin them, too.

What starts out as sensitivity can turn into serious evil, if one is not careful and allows himself to be influenced by bad company! On the other hand, good company can be very helpful. God has filled people with various gifts. Just as a person can see perversion in others, he can see their virtue as well and imitate it.

Help for children who have strayed

It is essential to have an atmosphere of love and peace at home. If children receive a little love at home, even if

they should stray for a while, they will see that they can't find love anywhere else, only hypocrisy, and they will return home. However, if they can only remember ugly scenes at home, arguments and enmity, how can they find the heart to go back?

– Geronda, what should the parents do when a child leaves home?

– They should try to keep in touch with the child, so that when he comes to his senses, he will be able to return home. They should speak kindly to their child, raise his awareness in order to help him. Let's say a child comes home late at night; his mother should approach him and say, "Look here, my child, if you were in my place and your children stayed out late at night, wouldn't you be very worried?"

Even the most serious fall of the children shouldn't make parents desperate, for sin has become fashionable in our time. They should always keep in mind the following: Nowadays, young people will be granted certain "extenuating circumstances" and will be judged with leniency for their transgressions. Today, a grade of "seven" for conduct is the equivalent to the "ten" – "excellent" of our schooldays. Of course, parents will always try to help their children, but they mustn't be overly anxious. Children will get more sensible and experienced with time. Right now they may not understand what is good because their mind has not yet matured. Their mind is cloudy and it lacks the clarity to discern the danger that lies ahead and the irreparable damage they can suffer.

It would be good if the parents indicated to the child that they do get upset over unacceptable behaviour; but they mustn't become overbearing; and of course, they

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should continue to pray. Prayers, spoken with pain, are effective. If the child does something very serious, the parents must intervene appropriately. If it isn't so serious, then they can overlook it a little, so as to not provoke the child and make the situation worse by causing the child to distance himself from them. They must pray to Christ and *Panaghia* to protect their child.

The prayer of the parents and particularly of a mother, because it is from the heart and has pain, is readily heard. When I was at the *Skete* of Iveron, a young man came by chance and found me. He was wandering in Chalkidiki, found some group of pilgrims coming to the Holy Mountain and came with them to the *kellion*. My goodness, he was an atheist, blasphemous, most impudent! He had a devilish cleverness and believed in nothing. He swore at all of the other pilgrims, young and old. With patience and a little effort, I brought him to some reckoning; I gave him a haircut, too, because he had very long hair. "Look," I told him, "may your mother be well, for it was certainly her prayers that brought you here." "You're right, Father," he told me. "I was wandering in Chalkidiki, and I don't even know how I got here." "If your mother finds out that you have come here to the Holy Mountain and sees you with your hair cut, she will feel such joy for you!" "How did you know that, Father? My mother will truly be overjoyed to see me so changed!" he responded. God turned him this way and that way and guided him to the ... master! How much prayer his mother must have poured out for him!

Reprimanding and praising a child

Parents must be very careful not to reprimand their children in the evening, because, at that time, when the children have nothing to distract them from their troubles, the darkness of the night will make their troubles darker still. They start thinking of ways to react; they search for different solutions; then the devil gets involved, and the children can even reach a state of hopelessness. If children are reprimanded during the day, they can go out; their troubled "darkness" disperses, and they eventually forget their trouble.

– Geronda, does a beating help to correct children?

– As much as they can, parents should refrain from beating their children. Through kindness and patience, they should try to help the children understand that what they're doing is wrong. Only when children are very young and don't understand that what they're trying to do is dangerous, then it may help to give a little slap that will make them avoid whatever it is they are doing the next time. The fear of getting another slap serves as a brake, for protection.

When I was little, my mother was more helpful to me than my father. Both of them loved me and wanted only what was good for me. Each one helped me in their own way. My father was strict. Whenever we, as small children, did something bad, he slapped us. I could feel the sting of the slap and would restrain myself for a while; but when the pain passed, I would forget both the pain and my father's advice. It wasn't that he didn't love me; he gave me those slaps out of love. I remember one time when my father gave me a slap – I was three years old –

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that sent me flying! What had happened? There was an abandoned house next to ours. The owners had moved to America, and the house had just fallen apart. In the yard, there was a fig tree whose branches reached out to the street. It was summertime and the tree was full of figs. As I was playing with the other children, a neighbour came and lifted me up to pick some figs for him because he couldn't reach them on his own. I cut five or six figs for him and he gave me a couple too. When my father learned of this, he became very angry. He gave me a slap! I started crying. My mother who was present turned and told him, "Why are you slapping the child? What did he know? He's only a child. How can you stand it hearing him cry?" But my father explained his reasoning, "If he had cried when the man lifted him to pick the figs, he wouldn't be crying now. But it seems that he, too, wanted to eat some figs. So let him cry now." I didn't dare to do it again! My mother also noted my mischief, but she had a certain noble spirit about her. When I did something naughty, she would turn her face away and pretend not to see me, so as to not make me sad by having to scold or reprimand me. But this behaviour of hers would break my heart. It made me think, "Look, I did this mischief and my mother not only does not punish me, she also pretends not to even see me! I'll never do this again! How can I upset her like that?" With her stance, my mother was able to help me even more than if she had slapped me. But then again I didn't take advantage of the situation by thinking, "Oh, well, she's not seeing me now, I can do another more mischievous thing." Whereas with my father, the moment I did something wrong, I got slapped right then and there. You see, they both loved

me, but it was my mother's noble stance that corrected me the most.

– Geronda, some children are very naughty; they shout; they run; they break things. How can a parent refrain from spanking them?

– Look, again it's not the children's fault. In order to grow normally, children need a yard to run, to play. Nowadays the poor things are closed inside apartment buildings and are under a great deal of pressure and stress. They can't run about; they aren't free to play, to enjoy themselves. Parents shouldn't worry when a child is lively and energetic. A lively child has a lot of energy inside and can make great progress in life, if this energy is channelled properly.

Pressure does not help the children

Some parents are just too overbearing and apply a lot of pressure upon their children, particularly in front of others! It is as though they're dealing with a mule and trying to force it move ahead by using a switch; they hold the reigns tightly, and then they tell them, "Walk freely!" Then the children come to the point of beating their own parents. Just today a mother came here with her son, a tall young man, who was sick. "What can I do, Father? Our boy doesn't eat and doesn't even want to see us," she told me. I told her what to do and then she asked again, "What shall I do now?"

– Perhaps, Geronda, she did not understand what you told her?

– Of course she understood! I told her, "I can't bear to sit an hour with you; how do you expect the boy to be

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with you all the time? You have driven him crazy!" "No, I love him," she said. "How can you love him, if he cannot relax being near you? He wants to leave the house because he wants to be in another environment. When he's away from you, he is fine. For him not to want to be with you must mean that you, too, are at fault for his situation. Don't provoke him; you're emotionally abusing the boy by treating him the way you do. Treat him kindly, with patience." Having said all that to her, she asked me again, "What should I do? The boy does not want us." How can you communicate with a person like that? To have a boy that is perfectly fine and they make him out to be stupid? This is detrimental.

Parents cannot help their children by force; they suffocate them. When they're constantly hovering over them: "No, not this; no, not that; do this, but do it this way..." they're not helping the children. They should pull on the reigns gently enough so they won't break. They can keep watch over the children to keep them in line, but without creating a distance between them. They should do what a good gardener does when he plants a small tree: He ties it gently to a strong stake to keep it from growing crooked and from being harmed when the wind blows a little to the right, a little to the left. He waters it regularly, taking care of it so that its branches grow. He may also surround it with a fence so the goats won't eat it, for if the goats eat its branches and truncate it, the tree will be destroyed. A truncated tree cannot bear fruit; it can't provide any shade. Once the branches grow big and strong, then the gardener removes the fence, and the tree can bear fruit and comfort goats, sheep and people with its shade.

Oftentimes, over concerned parents want to tie their children with "wire", however they should tie them gently in place, without hurting them. They should try to help their children in a noble way, which will cultivate in them a sense of *philotimo*, and help them view the "good" as a necessity. They must explain what is good in a good way, with love and pain. I remember a mother whose eyes would fill with tears when she saw the children doing something wrong, and she would say with pain in her voice, "No, my sweet child." Through her good example, she taught them to struggle with joy; to avoid the temptations of life; to not be easily swayed by troubles, but to face them with prayer and trust in God.

Nowadays, young and old alike live as if they were in a nuthouse, which is why great patience and much prayer are so necessary. Instead, some parents drive their children crazy – like a clock that is a little damaged or faulty – the parents over-wind it a little, and the springs break. Discernment is essential in such matters. One child needs more winding, while another needs less. The poor children are exposed to all of the currents. They hear all sorts of messages outside: "Don't respect your parents; don't listen to the authorities; don't respect anything..." Then, when the mothers try to tighten the reins, they rebel even more.

This is why I advise mothers not to pressure their children, but to pressure themselves instead to pray more fervently. If they're always saying "no" to their children for the most unimportant things or even unfairly, then, when something serious is happening – for example, when the child is about to pour gasoline on a fire – the child may not listen to the warning and suffer great harm.

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A child does not understand that the parent's love is hidden in the "no". And even when a child matures a little, it is then that egoism enters the picture, causing the child to rebel against them when they censure him. Their reasoning goes something like this: "Am I still a little child for my parents to treat me like this?" The parents must help the children understand that, just as when they were little and they had to be careful not to burn themselves, now that they are older they need to understand that there are other "fires" that can burn them. This is why they must be cautious not to give rights to the evil one, in order to preserve the Grace of Holy Baptism.

The indiscreet and excessive love of parents

– Geronda, can a mother out of excessive love harm her child?

– Of course she can. When, for example, a mother who sees her little child falling down while trying to walk thinks: "Oh the poor child can't walk," she then holds the child constantly in her arms. If she doesn't hold the child by the hand a little, how will that child ever learn to walk? It is done out of love, but this excessive protection is harmful to the child. I met a father whose son had completed his military duty and who still accompanied him to the barber for his regular haircut! "I brought my son for his haircut. How much will it cost and when should I come back to pick him up?" This man had crippled his child.

The expression of love needs restraint and discernment. True love is selfless; it does not include our self,

and is prudent and discreet. Prudence is especially essential in the abundant love of a mother so it is not foolishly wasted. A young man once came to the *Kalyvi* who felt exasperated with his parents. They certainly had good intentions but did not know how to help their son. He was telling me how his parents were pressuring him and did not really love him, and so forth. "Look," I told him, "when you were little and your mother bundled you with lots of clothes to go out in the cold, why did she do it? So you would not get cold or so you would suffocate? Her act indicated great love for you." I went on like this and when he realised how much his parents really love him, he broke down and cried. His mother really loved him; this love, however, did not help him because of the way she treated him, which caused negative reactions on his part.

When needed, the mother must be strict with the child. It does not help when she takes the child's side too readily, just so she won't cause sadness. In Adana a widow had only one son – John was his name. When he grew up a little, she took him to a cobbler to learn the trade. The boy stayed one week with the cobbler and then said to his mother, "Mother, there is no need for me to go to the cobbler anymore; I have learned the trade." "How did you learn so quickly?" she asked. "If you like, I can show you how they make shoes. Here, this is how they cut the sole, the leather; this is how they put on the heel, how they nail it..." The master cobbler was very good and he really wanted to teach John the trade, seeing that he was an orphan and needed support. When a week had passed and John did not show up at the cobbler's shop, he was worried about him and went to his house to ask his

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mother if the boy was sick. "What happened to John? He has not come back to the shop. Is he sick?" "No, he is not sick, he is very well," she answered. "Then, why did he not come back to work?" "Well, why should he go back? John does not need to go back; he has already learned the trade," she said proudly. "But how can you say that he has learned the trade in such a short time?" Then the mother proceeded to indicate to the cobbler how she, too, had learned how shoes are made. The cobbler laughed, bade her farewell and returned to his shop. When he returned to the shop, the other apprentices asked about John, and he told them, "John is just fine; not only has he learned the trade, but his mother has as well!"

I see this behaviour in many parents today. They imagine that they love their children, but with the manner in which they treat them, they destroy them. When a mother, let us assume, out of excessive love kisses her child and says, "There is no other child in the world like my child," then she is cultivating pride and a sick sense of self-confidence. After that, the child will not be obedient to the parents because he presumes he knows everything.

The parents must also help the children from a young age to learn to assume responsibility for themselves. They should be given opportunities in the family to do small chores suitable for their age and not to want to have everything ready-made for them. Otherwise, they will encounter difficulties when they grow up. A master tradesman worked hard all his life to raise his children. They spent their days in idleness, wandering about the town. Even when they got married, they still expected things to be done by their father. When the father finally said that it was time for them to look after their own homes and

families, they retorted, "That's just great, Father! How is it that you never left us uncared for when we were little children; and now that we've grown and have obligations, you're leaving us?!"

Distribution of property

The parents who have the economic means are responsible for providing for the future of their children. Naturally, the most important thing is to give them a good upbringing; then to educate them or send them to learn a trade to make a living; and later, to help them acquire a home, and so on. When our family came to Greece in 1924 from Pharasa in Cappadocia, back then with the Exchange of Populations, my father, as president of the town, saw to it that all the families of the town were taken care of. He left our family for last. Later my older brothers complained to him. "Father, you took care of all the others, and did not think of us." If someone is alone, he can give everything away and treat himself with indifference, out of an altruistic and noble spirit. But if he has a family, he must think of his family.

Of course parents should not grow bold and give everything they have to their children all at once, because the children are inexperienced and may be vulnerable to this contemporary life which has no bounds. Then they will worry all the more for not being able to help them any longer. They must also be careful to provide the weaker child with extra material help and even more emotional support so that he is not overwhelmed with a sense of failure. Overall, they should take care of all their children

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with love and discretion, so that they can remain close and have harmony among themselves.

It is rare to find families that are close and loving; living a spiritual life; where the brothers and sisters are not fighting over properties and estates and running to the courts. I knew a family of seven. The parents had some gold jewellery. After their death, the children agreed that the brother who took care of their parents in their old age should take the jewels. But he thought that his sister with the big family needed them more, so he gave them to her. She, in turn, thought that the other brother should have them; and he gave them to the other brother, and finally they returned to the first brother! This is exactly what was done by those Fathers we read about in the *Gerontikon*.[8] In the end, since the first brother did not want to keep them for himself, he gave them to a church.

8. Once they took some grapes to Abba Macarios. Even though he liked grapes, he showed self-control and sent them to a sick Brother who desired to eat grapes. The sick Brother rejoiced to see the grapes, but he too did not wish to satisfy his desire and gladly chose to send them to another Brother who had informed him of his lack of appetite. But this Brother did the same thing and sent the grapes to yet another Brother. Thus the grapes made their round to many Brothers, without anyone tasting them. The last Brother, not knowing that the grapes originally came from Abba Macarios, decided to send them to him as a gift. Abba Macarios recognised the grapes and marvelled at the great self-control of the Brothers (Palladios, Bishop of Helenopolis, *Lausiac History*).

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PART THREE

CHILDREN AND THEIR OBLIGATIONS

ΤΑ ΠΑΙΔΙΑ ΚΑΙ ΟΙ ΥΠΟΧΡΕΩΣΕΙΣ ΤΟΥΣ

"The blessing of the parents
is the greatest inheritance children can have.
This is why children must take care
to have their blessing."

CHAPTER ONE

Τα παιδιά, οι χαρές και οι δυσκολίες τους
Children, Their Joys and Their Difficulties

Little children

– Geronda, I have often noticed that infants smile during Divine Liturgy.

– They don't only do this during Divine Liturgy. Babies are in constant touch with God, for they are free of concerns. What did Christ say about little children? "*In Heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father Who is in Heaven.*"[1] They are in constant communication with God and with their Guardian Angel, who is continually by their side. In their sleep, they sometimes smile and sometimes cry because they see many things. Sometimes they smile when they see their Guardian Angel and play with him – he caresses them, teases them, plays with their hands – and sometimes when they see a scene of the evil one, they start to cry.

1. Mt 18:10.

– Why does the evil one go to infants?

– Even this is helpful to them, for they feel the need to seek out their mother. Without this fear, they wouldn't feel the need to seek their mother's embrace. God permits everything for our good.

– When they grow up, do they remember what they saw when they were very young?

– No, they don't. If a little child could remember how many times he saw his Guardian Angel, he would fall into pride. This is why he forgets these things when he grows up. There is wisdom in the works of God.

– After being baptised, do they see these things?

– Naturally, after Baptism they do.

– Geronda, can an unbaptised child reverence the holy relics?

– Why not? Someone can even bless the child with the holy relics. Just today I saw a little child who looked like an angel. "Where are your wings?" I asked him. He didn't know what to say! At the *Kalyvi* when springtime comes and the trees are in full bloom, I place some caramels on the bushes near the fence's gate, and I tell the little ones, "Go on boys, pick some caramels from the bushes over there, for if it rains, they will melt and go to waste!" Now, some smart little ones see what I've been up to and they laugh; some other ones actually do believe that the sweets grew on the bushes; and others just stand there wondering. Young children need a little sunshine, too...

– Geronda, do you put a lot of sweets there?

– Well, of course! Why not? You see, I don't give the expensive sweets to the adults; I give them the traditional *loukoumi*. When people bring me expensive sweets, I

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save them for the boys at the Athonias Academy.[2] Even last night, here in the monastery, I planted sweets and small chocolates and they've already ... blossomed! Did you see them? The weather was good, the earth was fertile, and you had dug the ground well, and they bloomed right away![3] Wait until you see what a beautiful flower garden I'm going to plant for you! We won't need to buy any sweets and chocolates for the children. Why, we can have our own sweet garden right here!

– Geronda, some pilgrims who saw the sweets you planted in the garden were puzzled and thought to themselves: "Some child must have put them there."

– Didn't you tell them that it was an older child who planted them?

The Guardian Angel protects children

– Geronda, why does God give a Guardian Angel to each person when He Himself can protect us?

– This is God's particular care for His creation. The Guardian Angel is God's "economy", providence. We are in debt for this. The Guardian Angels are especially protective of the young children. Oh, how they watch over them! Once, two little children were playing out on the street. One was aiming to throw a stone at the other one's head. The other child couldn't see this. At the last instant,

2. The *Athonias* Academy was established in 1748 on Mount Athos as an Academy of Greek studies. Today it functions as an Orthodox High School under the jurisdiction of the Church.

3. The Elder had laid wrapped sweets and small chocolates on the freshly dug soil, placing tiny lilac flowers on them to make them look like they had blossomed.

his Angel diverted his attention and he quickly moved aside and was saved.

Another time, a mother had taken her baby to the field. She nursed the baby, placed him in his cradle and went to work in the field. Some time later she went to check on her child and couldn't believe her eyes! The baby was holding a snake and looking at it! You see, after the breast-feeding, a drop of milk had remained on the baby's lips. The snake went to lick the milk with its tongue, and the child grasped it with his hand. The mother started screaming; the baby got frightened; opened his hand and the snake glided away. God protects the children.

– Then Geronda, why is it that many children suffer from illnesses and so on?

– God knows what will benefit each person and He provides accordingly. He won't give something which will not be of benefit to the person. For example, He sees that it will benefit us more if He gives us a weakness or a disability than if He protects us from being harmed or disabled.

Baptism

– Geronda, what will become of the departed people of Northern Epeirus who weren't baptised?

– Well, most of them had been air baptised[4] by their parents. There are also nurses who air-baptise babies. One nurse baptised a baby in a basin full of water. She

4. When the life of a newborn is endangered, then, even a lay person can baptise him in the name of the Holy Trinity, by raising the newborn in the air and making the sign of the Cross with him.

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thought this was better than an air-baptism; but God saw her good intentions... The newly illumined Christians have so much Grace! On one occasion, I was able to see that from among three hundred and fifty people, there was one woman who had been baptised. I asked, "Who is she?", and they told me that she was a Turkish woman who had been baptised. Her face was full of light. All the others looked like barbarians in comparison to her.

– Geronda, is it appropriate to give children two names during their baptism?

– If the parents are going to argue and get divorced over it, they can even give the child three names! What I don't like is the shortened names they give to children – Vicky, Pepi, Mimi…

– Geronda, a woman lost her baby during the fifth month of her pregnancy and is worried because the baby was stillborn and there was no chance to even do an air-baptism.

– She wasn't responsible for the miscarriage, so she must have confidence in the mercy of God. God maintains the records for these children.

– Geronda, my mother told me that my little brother died a few hours after birth, and she didn't have the chance to baptise him. I advised her to tell this to her Spiritual Father.

– Since she wanted to baptise the child but couldn't do so in time, there are extenuating circumstances. There are women who have abortions and kill their babies. We do not know the judgment of God. It would be a serious sin of omission if she didn't have her child baptised out of neglect and indifference and he died unbaptised. You dealt with the matter rationally. This is the theology

of rationalism. Once I told a group of people that there was a child in Northern Epeirus who had been baptised three times: once by the grandmother, once by the grandfather and once by the mother – and all, secretly from each other – because they all believed that he hadn't been baptised. Someone in the group jumped up to say, "That is a non-canonical thing to do." "My good man," I retorted, "did they baptise the child three times dogmatically? This child was blessed three times!"

– Geronda, does God arrange for people to see departed relatives in their sleep in order to speak with them so that they may be helped in their faith, in their repentance?

– Yes, I think I've told you of such an event… Once there was a monk on Mount Athos who was from a Bulgarian village where a lot of people weren't baptised. He told me that when he was still a layman and hadn't been baptised yet, he dreamt that he saw his little nephew, who had died a short time before, standing outside of a very beautiful garden and crying. There were a lot of children inside this garden, playing happily. "Why don't you go inside too?" he asked his nephew. "How can I go inside? I'm not baptised," he responded. After having that dream, he went immediately to get baptised and then related his dream to the priest. This is how God arranged for everyone to realise the value of Baptism. Following this event, the villagers started baptising their children.

– Geronda, some couples who were married through a civil ceremony want to baptise their children. Is it permissible?

– Why shouldn't it be? After all, it's not the poor children's fault. Just the fact that they wish to baptise their

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children shows that there's still something inside them; they're not entirely indifferent. Apparently they got confused somewhere along the way. But in order to help them, one must discover the reason why they didn't get married in Church in the first place, and then find out why they want to baptise their children.

– Geronda, does a nun have to send gifts to the child she baptised when she was still in the world, aside from the prayer she will offer for the child?

– Well, a nun is now free from such customs and obligations. Now, her parents can do something if they wish to. The nun will help with her prayers.

– Do you mean if her parents think of it on their own?

– Yes, the nun mustn't oblige them. She can pray for God to enlighten them. In any case, the godparent has a great responsibility. My parents had once promised their friends' family that someone in our family would baptise one of their children. When that time came, everyone in our family had gone away; so they asked me to be the godfather. I was sixteen years old then and I didn't want to baptise the child because I was quite aware of the great responsibility I would have to assume. I was in a tough spot, so I prayed for guidance. "My Lord," I prayed "if he is destined to become a good person, take all the years from me and give them to him. But if he is to become an evil person, take him now that he is still an angel." I baptised the child, giving him the name, Paul. He died one week later. He is secure in Heaven now.

Orphaned children

– Geronda, if young children lose their father, should they be allowed to see him dead?

– It's better not to. It's tough enough to speak to adults about the death of a loved one; you can imagine how much harder it can be for children!

– Up to what age?

– Well, that depends on the child.

– Should little children be taken to the grave site?

– Yes, they can be taken to the grave site. They can be told: "Your father went to Heaven from here. If you're well-behaved, he will come from Heaven to see you." I remember, when my grandmother died, they took me to a friend's house, so I wouldn't see the funeral and know what happened. While I was at the friend's house, everyone played with me and entertained me. I was laughing and my parents and kindred were crying. When I got back home, I kept asking, "Where's grandmother?" "She's coming", they told me. So, I was waiting for my grandmother to come home again... Later on, after some time had passed, I found out that she had died. It doesn't help young children to see their beloved family members dead.

– Geronda, young children experience immense pain and loss when their mother dies.

– There is no greater loss for a child. Children feel more orphaned when they lose their mother instead of their father, and this is why their pain and loss is greater. It is rare to see a father be like a mother to the orphaned children. However, they will find consolation in Paradise. They will have something to receive there. An orphan will enter Paradise with lower scores, just like Greeks in

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a foreign country can enter the Greek universities without entrance examinations.[5] In other words, orphaned children are covered by the law of God and will enter Paradise with less effort, while everyone else will have to struggle more. I consider the children who have been deprived of their parents' love as being blessed, for they have made God their Father from this present life. As for their parents' love, of which they have been deprived, it's been deposited into God's Treasury and is accumulating interest.

But even in this present life, God in His goodness shall help them because from the moment He takes their parents, He is, in a way, obligated to protect them. What does the Prophet David say? "*He upholdeth the fatherless and the widow.*"[6] God naturally has greater love and concern for the orphans. In this life, God provides more rights to orphaned children than He does to other children. If the orphan turns "the knob" to goodness, then he will make great progress. However, if he should think, "I have endured suffering, and now I will cause others to suffer like I did," then he will definitely be destroyed.

– Geronda, does becoming orphaned have unpleasant repercussions throughout the orphan's life?

– What are you talking about? Yes, orphans may be a little reserved, restrained, or shy – they don't have that happiness, that liveliness that those children who are sated with their parents' tender love have, but this restraint of theirs serves as a spiritual brake which helps them in this life and provides deposited reserves for the other.

5. This was said in 1992, when the special law was still in effect.
6. Ps 146:9 (LXX 145:9).

Do you think God doesn't take notice of their humble and reserved nature? Do you think that He won't provide somehow for these orphans? This is why we must embrace the orphan – especially the one who has lost his mother – with pain and with fervent love, to give him warmth and to encourage him until he opens his heart. And when an orphan has *philotimo*, we really must help him contain his enthusiasm and prevent him from suffering exhaustion in his attempts to express gratitude. Saint Arsenios the Cappadocian grew up as an orphan, having lost both parents. If he had not faced his orphanhood in a spiritual and courageous way, he would have been tormented by psychological problems. But you can see what tremendous courage he had! What great struggles he undertook! And what really amazes me is that his bones were soft like cotton, like a sponge. At the time of the exhumation, when I transferred his bones, his ribs and his spine were very brittle and cracked easily. Only two spinal discs, his pelvis and his tibia and fibula were somewhat strong. He was a rather unwell man, and yet he endured such great journeys on foot. He walked as if he were flying! From this, one can see the supernatural strength given to him by God. So, in providing for orphans, Christ will most certainly not be held back.

Restrictions for children are necessary until they come of age

Children should always feel that they have a great need for advice, especially during their critical adolescent years, so they won't slide down the sweet slope of worldliness, which fills the soul with anxiety and

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distances it forever from God. They must enter into the spirit of obedience. They should understand that hidden within their obedience to their parents lies their own gain or advantage, so that they will submit happily and move freely in the spiritual realm.

Do you see how we limit the freedom of a little child? First, the embryo is restricted within his mother's womb for nine months. Then, the newborn child is placed in a cradle. After five or six months, the cradle is surrounded by protective bars. Later, the child is not left alone outside, which prevents falls and accidents. If left alone, a young child can easily fall and get hurt.

All of these measures are essential for a child to grow up safely and securely. It may seem as though the child is deprived of freedom, but without these measures the child would be exposed to danger from the very first moment. But children, don't understand -- neither when they are small, that they need restrictions; nor when they are older, that they need different kinds of restrictions – and that's why they search for freedom. But what kind of freedom is this? Freedom to hurt themselves? That kind of freedom will lead them to destruction. They need to understand that until they finish their school; until they receive their degree; until they mature as whole and well-balanced human beings, certain restrictions are necessary. For, if they are seriously damaged once, they can be destroyed. They must feel the restriction as a necessity, as a blessing from God. They must be grateful to their parents for imposing restrictions. They should know that everything their parents do is done out of love. No parent ever restricts his child out of malice, even if they may sometimes behave badly toward them. And even if par-

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ents tighten the reins a little more, this also reveals their great love. They mean well; they restrict the children in order to safeguard them from danger. Even a gardener will secure a newly-planted tree by wrapping it tightly with wire and in the process, harm it a bit. When the bark of the tree is damaged, the Good God provides for the wound to heal in time. And if God heals the tree's wound, you can imagine much more healing He will provide for His creation, the human being! In other words, if parents restricted a child a little more than what was necessary and his feelings were hurt, will God not take care of him?

Of course, children ought to talk with their parents and share their thoughts with them. Just as a monk in the monastery has his Elder to whom he reveals his thoughts and is helped, a child, too, should communicate with his parents. Ideally, a young child should first confess to his mother and then to the Spiritual Father. For just as when the child hurts his leg and the parents take him to the doctor and learn what they have to do to help in the healing process, they should likewise know what sort of spiritual or social problems the child has in order to help. If a child shares his problems only with the Spiritual Father, then how can the parents help their child if they don't even know what sort of problems he's having?

The difficulties of the young in school

Children who are able to judge, to discern, and are clever may encounter problems from time to time, and they suffer (as a result). They want to take care of everything in a rational manner and attempt to do things which may be beyond their capabilities. They may have a strong

mind, but they just don't know how to apply the brakes. They do experiments on themselves, as if they want to test their endurance and in the end, they suffer. If they were to humble themselves, their good judgment would help them make good progress. On the other hand, young people who don't have such a sharp mind and sense of judgment may not even have problems, but they may also not be concerned – in a good way – over such things.

There are so many students who, although they have studied and know the material, will not go and take the exam because they fear failure! Even though they're quite capable, out of sheer cowardice they create a situation of panic. But if they humbly said, "Bless me that I may do well, because I cannot do it on my own; but with your blessing I will try..." then, with humility, they will receive both the Grace of God and divine enlightenment. Later, as they begin to take their exams, they can also pray to their patron saint, who will also help – depending on the faith and devotion they have.

– Geronda, a girl studying in a foreign country wrote me the following: "I'm troubled by the thought that I will never be able to make any further spiritual progress."

– So, has this blessed soul come to such a conclusion about herself from living in Europe? She didn't go there to advance spiritually or to live in a monastic community; she went there to learn what she needs to learn in her chosen field of study. She only has to try to maintain her existing spiritual condition; she shouldn't try to make spiritual progress over there. After all, the Europeans are advanced in the sciences, not in spiritual matters. She mustn't pressure herself beyond her limits, and she shouldn't take everything to heart. It just isn't worth the

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effort to give one's heart and to suffer over such things. Let her consider her time there as if it were some military service. In the army, one endures a great deal of effort; one wearies and many times, one is treated very harshly. In Europe, at least one is treated politely – with the European mentality – even if that treatment is superficial and hypocritical. It was to be expected that she would have encountered these difficulties in a European university, for we see similar things happening in Greece as well. But what makes the difference is that here in Greece, being an Orthodox nation, those who have spiritual interests can find spiritual help. With a little patience and a little careful attention, the difficulties will be overcome. While she's there, she should take advantage of her free time to study and to pray as well, in order to be spiritually nurtured. The applied effort she will make to progress will enable her to become fully absorbed in her studies and will alienate every evil thought or youthful temptation.

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CHAPTER TWO

The Respect and Love of Children for Parents

The respect of children for parents

A child, when little, is unable to do anything for himself; so the parents take care of all his needs, food, clothing, and so forth. They help the child out of love, without the child having to work very hard. The child may do some light chore here and there. But, in this way, can the child repay his parents for their hard work, or for the amount of money they spent on him? However, when the child grows up and doesn't understand what his parents have done for him – it is a very grave oversight!

In the old days, parents would spank their children and the children would accept it without a second thought. Quite often they didn't even understand why they were being spanked in the first place. Nowadays children are full of contradictions and are always asking "why?" They have no simplicity. They judge every little thing as if it were to pass through a sieve. But that is not the way the Grace of God comes to us. When a child doesn't consider his father as a father and doesn't accept the guidance of

his father, that child is not a normal, legitimate child. If the parents make a comment or a remark about their behaviour, some children right away say, "I'll kill myself!" What can the parents do then? They give in and in the end, the children are destroyed.

The child must understand that if the parents give him a smack now and then, they are not doing it out of malice, but out of love, in order to correct him, so that he becomes better and will be able to rejoice later. When we were little children, whether our parents caressed us, whether they spanked us, whether they kissed us – we accepted it all. We understood that they did everything for our good. We had great trust in them. In fact, sometimes my mother would punish the wrong child, for she had no time to hold court. However, the guilty one would be censured by his conscience and would eventually admit that it was his fault, and the other child would be exonerated.

In the family, the young must have respect for the parents and for older people in general. They should feel that they have a need to show respect, submission and gratitude towards their elders. The older people, again, must have love for the younger ones and be ready to help and protect them. When the young respect their elders and the elders love the young, a beautiful family atmosphere is created. My father would tell me, "I want you to obey your older brother."[1] We knew that my father loved us all and so, we were bolder with him. We were even more obedient to our older brother, in whom we didn't find the love of our father.

1. Elder Paissios had seven brothers and sisters.

When husband and wife have respect for one another and the children respect the parents, the life in the family is peaceful and goes like clockwork. In such a family, the older son would never say to the mother, "Look here, Mother, never do this again!", or "Why did you do this and why did you do that?" But not even the father speaks to the mother in this manner. The older brother may joke and play around with the younger brother so as to make him happy, but the younger one must not become outspoken because of the happiness he feels whenever his brother plays around with him.

When I was at the Stomion Monastery and would go to town to buy materials, a little child, whose home was on the way to town, would come as soon as he saw me and I would kiss his hand. As time went on, he became accustomed to this and he would run to offer me his hand for a kiss! I would, of course, kiss it. Afterwards, his parents told me, "Father, please do not kiss his hand, because he goes to the priests and offers them his hand, and if they don't kiss it, he starts crying."

The married children's love for their parents

The Good God has provided that a married couple be united with a love such that both the husband and the wife can even abandon their own parents for the sake of the new union. If this type of love did not exist, they wouldn't be able to create their own family. The purpose of parenthood ends once the children are settled. From that point on, children only owe parents great respect and as much love as parents need. Now, I'm not saying that

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they should not love their parents; what I'm saying is that the new spouses ought to first love one another and then love their parents. They should have such an abundance of love for each other that they can share the overabundance of this love with their parents and grant them all their respect and gratitude. Their love should be noble, allowing each one to provide as much assistance as possible to each other's parents.

The husband should love his wife far more than his mother or any other loved and related person, for this greatly helps the harmony of the family. His love for his parents should be conveyed through his wife. The same thing, of course, should be done by the wife.

I know of couples who experience difficulties at the beginning of their marriage, because the wife or the husband loves the mother excessively. This usually stems from the *philotimo* they have; they feel great gratitude for their mother. With time, however, as the couple bonds ever more closely, this will not be a problem. It wouldn't be normal for a couple to so love one another from the start that their love would replace the love for the mother.

When the husband respects his parents, this is to his honour, as it is also an honour for the wife to respect and love her mother-in-law, for she gave birth to her husband, she raised him, and now that he is an adult, she (the wife) finds delight in him. All these things, when seen by the children, speak silently but powerfully to the souls of their children.

When a mother sees her son married, she feels just like an older child feels upon seeing a younger sibling in the arms of the mother, for before she found great consolation in his love for her – and seniors tend to become

like children again. You see, if one doesn't cut away passions while young, then as one matures, the self-will is weakened and the passions increase. But a daughter-in-law must not misunderstand this. If she is taking care of her aged mother-in-law, she should practice a little patience and not lose the wages she is accumulating by offering her this assistance. If she now serves her mother-in-law with patience, later, when the hardship passes, she will rejoice for the good she has offered. Naturally, the mother-in-law must love her daughters-in-law as her own daughters. My grandmother – my father's mother – loved my mother more than my father. When my brothers got married, the neighbourhood women said, "Wait till the daughters-in-law come..." And my mother would say to them, "Why do you say that? My mother-in-law loves me more than her daughter. Why should I not love my daughters-in-law in the same way?" And in fact she, too, loved them as her own daughters.

Old age humbles a person

How one is humbled in old age! Old people gradually lose their strength and resemble old hawks. When a hawk grows old, its feathers fall and its wings look like broken combs. I remember in the Monastery of Philotheou[2] there was a *Proistamenos* (a senior Elder of the Administration Council[3] of the Monastery) who in 1914 had gone voluntarily from Smyrna (Asia Minor) to

2. The Holy Monastery of Philotheou was then idiorrythmic.
3. The idiorrythmic monastery is ruled by a council of Superiors who are elected for life

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Albania, to take revenge on the Turks who had slaughtered his father. Once, he captured a Turk and was preparing to kill him. But the Turk told him, "Our religion is without grace and tells us to kill the infidels, while yours is not like that. Christ tells you not to kill." When he heard that, he was so moved that he threw away his gun and decided to go to Mount Athos to become a monk. So, he became a monk; he even became a *Proistamenos*, but still had the rebellious spirit within him. He was responsible for all the chores, and he kept all the keys to the storage spaces dangling from his belt. No one dared to speak a word to him. If a Father forgot to call him by his title "Elder Spyridon," he would have a fit.

One time during Great Lent, some bandits went to the monastery and demanded that cheese be given to them. "You swine," he told them, "you're asking for cheese during Great Lent!" And he threw them out of the monastery. Another time the Fathers had taken apart the chandeliers to clean them. The bandits had seen the shining pieces and mistook them for gold. So, they took them, threw them into bags and loaded them onto the mules of the area to transport them. But when Elder Spyridon saw them, he stopped them, emptied the bags and told them angrily, "You worthless trash, this is only brass, brass, just like you!" He was fearless! But in his old age, he had become sick and humbled by the circumstances of his life. They had assigned me to help him out a little. One day he called on me, "Averkie,[4] come and pray for me; I do not feel well." I got up and started praying aloud for him with my *komboschoini*: "Lord Jesus Christ, have

4. The name received by the Elder when he became a cassock-wearing monk.

mercy on your servant, the Elder Spyridon." But then: "Hey, you, just say, 'for Spiro'!" he told me, You see, sickness and old age had humbled him. Before that, no one would ever dare to address him by any name other than the formal "Elder Spyridon".

Even my own father was humbled in his old age by a single fly. One day my sister found him crying. "What is the matter, Father?" she asked him. "Has some grandchild disturbed you in some way?" "No, no," he responded. "What is a man? I just tried to kill a fly with the fly swatter and I could not. I tried this way and that way, and it got away each time. When I was young, I was such a marksman that I would not kill the Tsetes;[5] I wounded them intentionally so as to cause them to surrender. At sixteen I aimed at a lion, wounded it and fought with a wounded lion, and now I can't even kill a fly! Man is nothing!" The poor man felt that he was nothing, as if he hadn't done anything significant in his life.

Even in the infirmaries of the monasteries of Mount Athos, the elderly monks are so humbled in their old age. They go through a second "tonsuring"; they cut their long hair so it will be easier to wash and take care of. They also have to trim their beards for reasons of personal hygiene, as they may have difficulties eating and keeping clean. This is their final "tonsure". It is the tonsure of humility!

The reward of caring for the elderly

What has the world come to! In Pharasa and in Epeirus, people would even take care of elderly animals – not

5. Tsetes (çeteler) are Turkish rebel forces.

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just the mules, for that is understandable; but even those animals whose meat was edible. For example, they "respected" the strong oxen with which they ploughed the fields, so they took care of them in their old age saying, "We had bread because of them." In other words, working animals were taken care of when they grew old and were no longer able to work; they even had a good old age. Back then, people didn't have the means that are available today. Grain used for animal feed was ground manually into a fine consistency to enable the old and feeble oxen to eat it. Modern-day man has strayed from such things; they won't even take care of elderly humans, much less elderly farm animals!

I personally have never felt better than when I was asked to take care of a frail Elder. Taking care of an elderly person provides many rewards. I remember being told of a novice monk on Mount Athos who was possessed by a fearful demon and who had been assigned to take care of six elderly monks in the infirmary of the monastery. Things were tough back then; there were no conveniences. He would load their clothing onto his back and take them to a far-off cistern to wash them by hand, using lye... After some time, the novice was delivered from the demon and he became a monk. You see, not only did he take care of the elderly monks with a spirit of sacrificial love and respect, but he also received their many blessings.

Many couples are angered by the difficulties their families face, which are caused by the idiosyncrasies and the grumbling of the elderly parents they must tend. They forget how naughty, grumpy and peculiar they were when they were children. They don't remember that they

never gave their parents a moment's rest with all their crying and affected airs. This is why God allows them to encounter these difficulties – so that they may somehow pay off their own bad behaviour. Now it is their turn to support and take care of their elderly parents with gratitude for all the sacrifices they made for them when they were children. Those who don't feel this sense of obligation toward their parents will be judged by God as unjust and ungrateful.

I also see that the troubles many worldly people have are often caused by the fact that their parents are embittered with them. Families suffer because they fail to take care of their elderly parents. When the poor little old grandmother or the aged grandfather is taken to and abandoned in a nursing home, with their property taken away from them, while unable to enjoy their grandchildren and left to die with bitterness, what kind of a blessing can the children ever expect from them? Just today, an old lady told me that she has four sons who are married and live on the same block she lives on, but that she can't visit them because she once advised her daughters-in-law: "Have love among yourselves; go to church with your families!" Well, they were very offended. "Don't ever come to our homes again!" they declared. She hasn't seen her children for five years and the poor woman was crying. "Pray for me, Father," she told me, "I have grandchildren too; at least let me see them in my dreams." Well, what kind of progress can her children expect to make?

And even though having a grandmother in the family is a great blessing, these people don't understand that. Usually the grandfather becomes ill sooner and his wife

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takes care of him. When their father dies, then, it is good for the children to take their mother to their home and have her help with the grandchildren so that she doesn't feel useless and alone. They both win, as she finds comfort and the parents are greatly helped. For nowadays, a mother never has enough time to do her chores and to provide the children with all the tender loving care they need. Therefore, this is what the grandmother provides – because her age is the age of love and nurturing. You see, when the children are naughty, the mother will scold them; but the grandmother will caress them. With the grandmother's caregiving, a mother can get her work done, while the children have an abundance of loving care, and the grandmother herself can find comfort in her grandchildren's love.

He who looks after his parents has a great blessing from God. One day, a young family man said to me, "Geronda, I'm thinking of adding two small apartments – one for my parents and one for my in-laws – on the first floor of the new house I am building." You can't imagine how much this thought moved and pleased me! I gave him so many blessings! I wonder why it is that so many couples don't even understand this! Just a few days ago a woman came and told me, "Father, my mother had a stroke. I'm tired of these eight years of having to turn her first one way and then another." Can you imagine? A daughter speaking like that about her mother! "Well," I said to her, "this is simple. I will now pray that you get paralysed for eight years and that your mother recovers so that she can take care of you." "No, no, Father!" she shouted. "How about four years? At least four years," I responded. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Which is

preferable: To have your health with no pains, care for a sick person and have your reward from God, or to be sick and suffer, unable to move your leg, and have to humble yourself to beg, 'Bring the bedpan; turn me this way; turn me that way'?" After she heard all that, she came to her senses somewhat.

If children put themselves in their old parents' place, and if a daughter-in-law puts herself in her mother-in-law's place and thinks to herself, "One day I, too, will grow old and become a mother-in-law. Wouldn't I want my daughter-in-law to give me attention and care?" then, I believe, such problems wouldn't exist.

The parents' blessing

The greatest inheritance parents can give their children is their blessing, and children should make every effort to merit their blessing. Don't you remember what Jacob did to secure his father's blessing? He even put on the skin of a sheep![6]

The maternal blessing is the most important of all. Someone used to say, "Every word spoken by my mother is like a gold coin!" Just a short time ago, a man from Johannesburg made a great impression on me. He came to the *Kalyvi* in autumn and said, "Geronda, my mother is ill and I've come to see her." Three months had not passed and he came to see me again. So I asked him, "What brings you back?" "I was summoned that my mother is ill again and I've come to kiss her hand, for she is quite old and may die. For me, the greatest heritage is

6. Cf. Gen 27.

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my mother's blessing." Now, imagine, a sixty-year-old man set out from Johannesburg and came to Greece to kiss his mother's hand! And now he is so blessed, he's even thinking of building a large nursing home for the clergy and donating it to the Church. You could say that he has so many blessings that he doesn't know where to put them! For me, this kind of soul is like medicine. It's like being in the Sahara Desert and suddenly discovering a little bit of water. Such souls are rare nowadays.

Another man also came to the *Kalyvi* and he was crying. "Father, my mother cursed me. Our home is filled with illnesses and worries, and my work isn't going very well," he said. I said to him, "Surely, you weren't in line yourself. She can't have cursed you without a reason." "Yes, I was..." "Then go and ask forgiveness from your mother," I told him. "I will, Father," he answered, "but give me your blessing." "You have my blessing," I assured him, "but you must get your mother's blessing, too." "It will be difficult to get her blessing," he said. "You must go and if she does not give it to you, then tell her 'An Elder told me that you, too, will have to surrender your soul.' " So he went and his mother gave him her blessing, saying, "My son, may you have the blessing of Abraham!" After some time he came back to Mount Athos bearing cherry preserves and *loukoumia*. He was overjoyed! His children were well, and his business was also going well. He was constantly teary-eyed, and kept saying, "Glory be to God!" His whole life had changed and he talked about spiritual things all the time. How much more is one blessed when he has respect and reverence for his parents at all times! How could he not have the blessing of God?

CHAPTER ONE

Η πνευματική ζωή στην οικογένεια

Spiritual Life in the Family

The more one grumbles,
the more one falls into ruin

Geronda, why do people grumble and how can it be avoided?

– Grumbling is caused by misery and it can be put aside by doxology (giving praise). Grumbling begets grumbling and doxology begets doxology. When someone doesn't grumble over a problem troubling him, but rather praises God, then the devil gets frustrated and goes off to someone else who grumbles, in order to cause everything to go even worse for him. You see, the more one grumbles, the more one falls into ruin.

Sometimes the devil deceives us and makes us unable to be pleased with anything; however, one can celebrate all things in a spiritual manner, with doxology, and secure God's constant blessing. Look here, I know someone on Mount Athos who, if it's raining and you tell him, "It's raining again," he will start saying, "Yes, it's always raining; we are going to rot from all the humidity." And,

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if after only a little while the rain stops and you tell him, "Well, it didn't rain too much after all," he'll say, "Yes, but what kind of rain was that? Everything will dry out..." You can't say that he's crazy; it's just that he's grown accustomed to grumbling. It's strange to see a rational man thinking irrationally!

Grumbling carries a curse. It's as if someone is cursing himself, and then the wrath of God comes upon him. I knew two farmers in Epeirus. One of them was a family man who had a couple of small fields and who entrusted everything to God. He worked, as much as he could, without anxiety. He would say, "I'll do as much as I can manage." Occasionally, some of the hay bales would spoil in the rain because he didn't gather them in time, while other bales were scattered by the wind; and yet for all things he would say, "Glory to You, O God!" and everything went well for him. The other farmer had many fields, cows, and so on, but no children. If you asked him, "How are you doing?" he would invariably respond, "Forget about it; don't even ask!" He never said, "Glory to You, O God"; he was always grumbling. And so that you will see – sometimes a cow of his would die; sometimes one thing would happen to him, sometimes something else. He had everything, but he made no progress.

This is why I say that doxology is a great matter. Whether or not we taste the blessings God gives us depends on us. But how are we to taste God's blessings, if He gives us, for example, bananas and we're thinking of whatever better things some ship-owner might be eating? How many people there are who eat only dry bread, but praise God day and night and are nurtured with heavenly sweetness! Such people acquire a spiritual sensitivity and

are acquainted with the caresses of God. We don't understand these things, because our heart is caught up with filth and we are not satisfied with anything. We don't understand that happiness is in eternity and not in vanity.

Let us make God the governor of our life

– Geronda, why is the Kingdom of God in the Gospel likened to a grain of mustard seed, "*which, when it is sown into the earth, is less than all seeds that are in the earth; but when it is sown, it groweth up and becometh greater than all herbs* "?[1]

– The mustard seed is very small, but when it is sown, grows and becomes a great shrub. Even the little birds go and sit on its branches. The word of God is compared to the mustard seed, because from a small, evangelical word, man can grow spiritually and understand the Kingdom of God.

– Geronda, how should one take what is written in Sacred Scripture: "*The Kingdom of God is within you*"?[2]

– Blessed soul, whenever a portion of the joy of Paradise is in our heart, then "*the Kingdom of God is within us*." And the opposite, when we have anxiety, feelings of guilt, then there is a portion of hell within us. It is a great thing for man to be able to experience a portion of the joy of Paradise from this life. It isn't difficult to achieve this; but unfortunately, egoism prevents us from this spiritual magnificence.

1. Mk 4:31-32; Cf. Mt 13:32; Cf. Lk 13:19.
2. Lk 17:21.

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Man himself can make his life be paradisiacal, if only he would allow God to govern his life as a good Father. Man must have trust in God, have hope in Him for everything he attempts to do and glorify Him for all things. He should not have anxiety. Anxiety brings with it a rift in the soul; it paralyses it. When one is seeking the Kingdom of God, everything else will follow. The Gospel says, "*Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you*",[3] but also, "*The Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.*"[4]

People today have made their lives difficult, because they are not satisfied with a few things, but are constantly chasing after more and more material goods. But those who would like to live a genuine spiritual life must first of all be satisfied with a few things. When their life is simplified, without too many concerns and nuisances, not only will they be liberated from the worldly spirit, they will also have plenty of time available for spiritual things. Otherwise, they will tire themselves out by trying to follow the fashion of the times; they will lose their serenity and will gain only great anxiety.

And I see that people sometimes make a martyrdom out of their lives! Just today as I was coming with someone from Ouranoupolis, he invited me to go by his home for a little visit. He insisted, so I didn't want to disappoint him. As we reached the front door, I saw him take off his shoes and walk carefully on his toes. "Why are you walking like that?" I asked him. "It's nothing, Geronda; I am

3. Mt 6:33.
4. Cf. Mt 11:12.

walking carefully so that I don't ruin the parquet," he said. What can you say? People are tormented for no reason.

Feeling pain for the neighbour helps the family

The more goods people acquire today, the more problems they have. They neither thank God for His benefactions, nor do they take notice of the misfortunes suffered by their fellowmen to offer their charity. They just squander everything they have and don't give a second thought about the other man who doesn't have something to eat. Then, how can the Grace of God come to them? Even if one is a family man, he ought to put something aside for charity. He can tell his family that there's some sick and abandoned person or some poor family out there that needs help. Even if they don't have money to offer, he can say, "Let's give them one of our Christian books; we've got so many of them." By giving to those in need, one does well both for himself and for his family.

The poor, faithful people in Russia are so deprived! I once offered a little box of incense to a Russian priest and said to him, "It's a poor gift." "You call this poor? Our incense is of such bad quality, all it does is make us cough," he said. Even here in Greece, the refugees endure so much! In Chalkidiki I met a refugee, a tile-setter who only made three hundred drachmas per square meter,[5] and he kept saying, "Glory to Thee, O God, for we have bread to eat!" So, when some contractor told me that he himself

5. This was said in 1992, before the euro. Three-hundred drachmas is now equivalent to less than one euro.

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is burdened by a lot of sins in his line of work, I just told him, "If you would support these refugees and help them out, you would be relieved of your sins. They have no place to stay. Compared to them, you're Onassis!"[6]

In order for us to practice the virtues, God has allowed for some people to be sick, poor, disadvantaged and so forth. Of course, God could take care of the sick and the poor, but then we would be under the illusion that we are virtuous. For instance, we would say that we are merciful when we are not, whereas now our actions reveal our virtues. Glory be to God that there are people who sacrifice themselves to help their fellow human beings. I once met someone who, as soon as he was released from the military, willingly accepted an unjust conviction for a serious crime in order to save a family. He wasn't daunted by the ridicule, nor did he consider his future.

In any case, I notice how God so provides that at least one member of every family has faith and devotion, so the other members are helped as well. I knew a family in Konitsa wherein everyone was just completely indifferent to the Church. Only one daughter stood apart. As soon as she heard the church bell, she would put away her apron, stop whatever she was doing and go to church. Even when the Germans came and the sexton rang the bell for people to evacuate their homes, she would go to church for Vespers! And even though her parents were quite stingy, she was very charitable. Her father, instead of eating a regular meal, would take a dry rusk, dip it in

6. The Elder here refers to Aristotle Onassis (1906-1975), a prominent Greek shipping magnate.

water and eat it. Her mother, too, was very tight-fisted. Even though her children had good jobs and owned property, she would snatch a burning ember from the fireplace, instead of using up a match. She used a tin can as a coffee pot. When the daughter wanted to take something from the house and give it to some poor person – when she could not do it secretly – she would just say to her mother, "Mother, the monk needs this," – knowing that her mother had cared about me when I was at the Stomion Monastery. So, the mother would say, "Sure, go ahead, give it." Only if it was for the monk, did she raise no objection.

Even during the German Occupation, the daughter secretly helped a lot of poor people. She would take wheat out of the family's storage bin, carry it to the mill, grind it into flour and then distribute it to the poor families. One day her mother caught her doing this and she got into a lot of trouble. That's when she prayed, "God, help me find a job so I can give my entire earnings to the poor." Not long afterwards, she was called to work at an institution. O, the joy she felt! And she did keep her vow. She didn't even buy a pair of socks for herself; she gave all her money to charity. Now so many people remember her and say, "May God save you and bless the bones of your parents!" You see, God provided for her mother as well.

The practice of virtue within the family

– Geronda, how can a family man practice virtue?

– God provides opportunities. But a lot of men, while they're asking God to give them opportunities to practice virtue, grumble when they encounter difficulties.

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For instance, sometimes the Good God, in His infinite love and in order to provide the husband with practice in humility and patience, removes His Grace from the wife, and she becomes cranky, treating her husband badly. This is when the husband ought to thank God and gladly welcome the opportunity he is given to practice virtue and not complain. Or a mother asks God to grant her patience. Let's say she's got the table set for dinner and the little child pulls the tablecloth, spilling everything on the floor. This is as if the child is saying to the mother, "Mom, be patient!"

Generally speaking, the difficulties faced by people nowadays compel those who wish to live spiritually to be vigilant. It's just as when, God forbid, war breaks out and people have to be in a state of alert; those who are attempting to live spiritually have to do the same thing – be on alert. Just look at how difficult it is for the young children who wish to be close to the Church today! In a way, the war waged against them by the horrible environment in which they live helps them to be alert. You see, in times of peace, where there are no difficulties, most people slack off. But that's when they should take advantage of the peace and use it for their spiritual progress; that's when they should try to prune away their shortcomings and cultivate virtues.

Hesychia is very helpful in spiritual life. It's good for one to set aside some part of the day in which to maintain quiet. He should examine himself in order to recognise his passions and struggle to overcome uproot them and thus purify his heart. If, in fact, there is a quiet and isolated room in the house, one reminiscent of a monastic

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cell, it would be very helpful. There, "*in secret*",[7] one can carry out his spiritual duties of prayer and study. A little spiritual reading or study, when carried out prior to prayer, is very helpful because the soul is warmed and the mind is transported to the spiritual realm. This is why, when one has many distractions and cares during the day, he should – if he has ten minutes for prayer – give preference to first studying something particularly strong for two minutes, in order to dispel the distractions.

– Geronda, isn't it perhaps too difficult for someone living in the world to do these things?

– No, there are lay people who live very spiritually; some even live like ascetics, with their fasting, their attendance at prayer services, their reciting of the Jesus Prayer, their prostrations, even though they may have children and grandchildren. They go to church on Sunday, receive Holy Communion and then they retreat to their "cell", just like the hermits who gather on Sunday at the *Kyriakon*[8] for public worship, and then return to the peace of their monastic cells. Glory be to God, for there are many such souls in the world. As a matter of fact, I know a family man who continually recites the Jesus Prayer, no matter where he is; he has constant tears in prayer. His prayer became auto-activated and his tears are sweet; they are tears of divine exultation.

I also remember a certain worker – John was his name, there on Mount Athos – who worked very hard; he did the work of two men. I had advised him to say the

7. Mt 6:4.

8. The main church of a *Skete*, in which the ascetics and hermits from the nearby cells gather for common worship on Sundays and other holy days.

Jesus Prayer while he worked; gradually, he became accustomed to it. He came to me once and told me that he felt great joy when he said the prayer. "A serene 'dawn' is breaking," I told him. After some time I learned that he had been killed by two drunks. Oh, I was so saddened! Some days later, a monk was looking for a tool, but couldn't find it because John had put it away somewhere. That night John appeared in the monk's dream and told him where he had put the tool. You see, John had attained such a spiritual state that he was able to help others from the life hereafter.

How simple spiritual life is! If one comes to love God, if one comes to recognise His great sacrifice and His good works, and if one exerts himself, with discernment, in imitation of the saints, he will be quickly sanctified. It is enough that he be humbled, that he be conscious of his own wretchedness and his tremendous ingratitude towards God.

Prayer in the family

– Geronda, should the entire family pray the *Apodeipno* together?

– The older family members should bestir themselves with nobility; they should lead by example. They should read the *Apodeipno* and say to the younger family members, "You can stay with us for a little while, if you want." If the children are somewhat older, they can set up a rule; for example, fifteen minutes for the older children; two to five minutes for the younger children; and after that, as much as they want. If the parents make them stay for the entire *Apodeipno*, they'll just end up resenting it. They

mustn't pressure them, because they haven't yet grasped the power and value of prayer. For example, parents can eat beans and meat; they can eat all types of foods. But when a little child is still only drinking milk, are his parents going tell him to eat meat just because it's more nutritious? It may be nutritious, but the poor child can't digest it. This is why small children are given just a little meat and broth to start out with, so they'll want more.

– Geronda, sometimes adults are so tired in the evening that even they can't pray the *Apodeipno*.

– When they are very tired or sick, they should just pray half of the *Apodeipno* prayers, or at least say the Lord's Prayer. They shouldn't bypass prayer altogether. As in time of war, if at night you find yourself alone on a hill and surrounded by the enemy, you'll fire out an occasional shot to scare the enemy away and keep him at bay. They, too, should let out a shot of prayer to keep the devil away.

Prayer has great value in the family. I know of two brothers who managed through prayer not only to keep their parents from getting divorced, but even turned them into a more loving couple. My own father would tell us, "I don't know what you're going to do, but at least twice a day you must present yourselves before God, so He knows where you are." So, each and every morning and each and every evening we all did our prayers in front of the icons – father, mother and the children – ending with a prostration before the icon of Christ. And when we had some problem in the family, we prayed that it would be solved.

I remember once, when my younger brother got sick, my father said, "Come, let us pray and beseech God to

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either heal him or to take him so he will not suffer." We all prayed and he became well again. Even at mealtime we all gathered around the table to pray before we began to eat. If anyone started eating before the meal was blessed, we would say, "He committed fornication." You see, we viewed the lack of restraint to be a form of prostitution. It destroys a family to have each member come home, any time they like, and eat alone without good reason.

The spiritual life of the couple

– Geronda, if a husband doesn't live spiritually, what should his wife do?

– She should entrust him to Christ and pray that his heart be softened. Eventually, little by little, Christ will descend in his heart, and he will start speculating. As soon as his heart is somewhat softened, then she can ask him, for example, to drive her to church. She shouldn't say to him, "Come to church with me," but: "Can you please take me as far as the church?" If he takes her all the way to church, then he might say to himself, "I've come this far; why don't I go inside and light a candle?" In this way, little by little, he may make progress.

– Geronda, can the wife's Spiritual Father also help the husband in some way?

– Sometimes, in order to help the husband, the Spiritual Father needs to help the wife develop her spiritual life. The good will then be transmitted from the wife to the husband and if he has a good heart, God will help him to change.

Women are pious by nature. But once a man, after being somewhat indifferent towards the Church, takes a

"spiritual turn", not even his wife can keep up with him. She may even begin to feel a little envy for not making as much progress as he does. This is why I advise the husbands to be careful in such cases. Because, what happens? As the husband makes spiritual progress, the wife, if she is not also living a spiritual life, may become contrary. If the husband says, "It's getting late; get up; let's go to church," she will tell him, "Go by yourself, don't you see how much housework I have to do?" Or, if the husband says, "Great ... you've kept the oil vigil lamp unlit!" or if he goes to light it himself, she may be offended and start yelling, "What, are you a priest now? Are you a monk?" She may even say, "Why do we bother to light the oil vigil lamp? It would be better if we gave the oil to some poor person." The situation can get to the point of such protestant notions. Naturally, she may regret the excuse she made, but she is also envious of her husband's progress. In these cases, it's a thousand times better to leave the oil vigil lamp unlit than for the husband to light it. So, to keep a family from falling apart, I advise the husbands, "When the right moment comes, tell your wife: 'If I go to church and pray a little and do some prostrations, or if I read some spiritual book, I'm not doing this out of an abundance of devotion, but only as a means of self-restraint, to keep me from being led astray by our wretched society and getting involved with bad company.' " If the husband handles this carefully, then the wife will be happy and may even go on to outdo her husband spiritually. But if he is careless and insensitive, he'll crush her. They might even end up divorcing. If the husband wants to help his wife spiritually, he should try to introduce her to some family that lives a

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spiritual life with a particularly devout mother and wife, one that she can imitate.

Children and spiritual life

– Geronda, if a mother gives holy water to her child and he spits it out, what should she do?

– She should pray for her child. Maybe it's the way she gives the holy water to the child that's causing a reaction. In order for a child to be on the path of God, his parents must be living a proper spiritual life. Some parents who are religious strive to help their children become good persons, not because they are concerned about the salvation of their souls, but because they just want to have good children. In other words, they tend to be more concerned about what other people will say about their children, instead of whether or not the children might go to hell. But then, how can they expect God to help them? The point is not to force the children to go to church, but to help the children get to know and love the Church. Children shouldn't feel pressured to be good; they should feel a need to be good. The parents' holy life informs the children's souls and they then naturally follow their example. As such, they grow up with devotion and with health of both flesh and spirit, without emotional traumas. If parents, out of fear of God, encourage their children, God helps and the children are helped. But if they do this out of egoism, then God does not help. Many times children suffer because of their parents' pride.

– Geronda, some mothers ask us which prayers a child of three or four years old should say.

– Tell them: "You are the mother; try to find out how much your child can handle." They shouldn't give them a rule.

– Geronda, do you think the children who are brought here for the night vigils get too tired?

– They should let them rest for a little during Orthros, and then bring them inside for the Divine Liturgy.

Mothers should teach their children to pray from an early age, without forcing them. Villagers in Cappadocia lived the ascetic traditions to the fullest. They would go to the ascetic cells (of the saints) where they would do prostrations and pray with tears, and in this way, taught their children to pray. When the Tsetes, Turkish irregulars, would come at night to rob them, they passed by the chapels and heard them crying. They were puzzled. They would say, "What's going on? These people laugh during the day and they cry at night." They couldn't understand what was going on.

Miracles happen with the prayers of little children. Whatever they ask of God, He provides, because they have innocence, and God hears their pure prayer. I remember one time when my parents had gone to the field and left me with my two younger brothers. Suddenly the sky darkened and a torrential rainstorm broke out. We said, "What will become of our parents? How will they get back home?" The two little ones started crying. "Come here," I said to them, "we will pray and ask Jesus to stop the rain." The three of us knelt down before the icons and started praying. In just a few minutes the rain stopped.

With discernment, parents should help their children, from a young age, to draw near to Christ and to experience, from that young age, the higher joys – the spiritual ones.

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When they start going to school, they should teach them, little by little, to read spiritual books and help them live spiritually. Then they can become angels and their prayer will have greater boldness before God. Such children are a spiritual investment for the family. Specifically, the *Lives of the Saints* greatly assist children in the spiritual life. When I was little, I would take those little books with the *Lives of the Saints* that were available in those years, and I would go into the woods to study them and to pray. I was flying with joy. From the age of ten to sixteen, when the Greek-Italian War began, I lived a carefree spiritual life. Childhood joys are pure; they leave a lifelong imprint on a person, who will find himself very moved by (the memory of) them when he is older. If children live spiritually, they will live joyfully in this life and rejoice eternally in the presence of Christ in the afterlife.

Relationships with relatives and friends

– Geronda, a woman asked us what she should do about her two cousins who have been living off of her, like parasites, for years.

– What does she want? Should we come up with a new Gospel? God has asked her to help her cousins and He will do whatever is beneficial for their souls.

– Geronda, when there is a misunderstanding among relatives, should someone intervene in order to help them?

– Yes, someone should say something discreetly, because if he keeps silent, he may cause further harm. If by doing this he is misunderstood, he should go once again

to say, "Please forgive me for upsetting you." Following that, he should leave them alone, and pray for them.

If one wishes to live peacefully, he must be especially careful in his relationships with relatives and friends. One mustn't be fooled by the politeness he may encounter. Worldly politeness can be very harmful because it contains hypocrisy. One's external behaviour may simulate the perfect saint, but when his inner self is revealed, it may be the complete opposite.

– Geronda, when someone feels the kindness of another, is it right to acknowledge it?

– It isn't necessary if they're close friends or relatives, because he, too, will have been of assistance to him, being aware of the inner gratitude that exists between them. But if they are not close or related, then, he should express his gratitude in every way possible. To strangers we say, "Thank you." If, let's say, a child wants to express his gratitude to his parents, he should do nothing else but say constantly, day and night, "thank you" for everything his parents are doing for him.

It is very helpful to be simple in our relations with others, to always have good thoughts about them, and to not take everybody too seriously. One should avoid discussions which are presumably held for spiritual improvement, but only bring headaches instead. One shouldn't expect spiritual understanding from people who don't believe in God. It's better if one simply prays for them that God will forgive them and enlighten them. One should speak the language of each person (at that person's level), and not reveal the great truths that he believes and experiences, because they will not understand him, as he speaks on another frequency and a different wavelength.

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Some people say, "I want others to know Christ like I know Him," and so they act as a teacher to others. But to do this, their life has to be in accordance with what they are teaching. When the lives they lead teach a different Christ and do not correspond with what they say, then they cannot claim to have known Christ. And if one does not have inner, practical experiences, he will be outside the realm of reality and sooner or later, he will be betrayed by his own self. When we approach someone with pain and true love, then this true love of Christ transforms our neighbour. The person who has holiness, no matter where he is, somehow creates an electromagnetic spiritual field around himself and influences those who come within this field. Of course, we must be careful not to squander our love and give our heart away too easily, because many times people will exploit our heart and turn it into ground meat, or at other times, they aren't able to understand us and they misinterpret us.

Temptations on holy feast days

– Geronda, why do temptations often occur on feast days?

– Don't you know? On holy feast days, Jesus Christ, *Panaghia* and the saints are most joyful, treating us with blessings and other spiritual gifts. If parents offer treats when their children celebrate (their nameday) and kings grant amnesty when a new prince is born, why shouldn't the saints also offer treats? In fact, the joy they give is very powerful and very beneficial to the souls. Knowing this, the devil creates temptations in order to deprive people of these divine gifts and prevent them from rejoicing

and benefiting from these feast days. And you can see sometimes when a family is preparing to go to church and receive Holy Communion on a feast day, the evil one will cause them to argue for some reason, and they end up not only not receiving Communion, but also not going to church. The devil will so entangle things that they are deprived of all divine help.

You'll also see this in our own monastic life. Many times, the devil, knowing full well that we will benefit spiritually on a feast day, will create a temptation – spoiler that he is – on that day, or rather from the night before and spoil our entire disposition. For example, he may get us to argue with another Brother and torment us afterwards by breaking our spirit emotionally and physically. Thus, he does not allow us to benefit from the holy feast day through the joyful process of praising God on that day. But the Good God will help us, as He sees that the temptation was caused solely by the envy of the evil one and not provoked by us. And God may help us even more if we humbly reproach ourselves, blaming neither our brother, nor the devil himself who hates every good, for, after all, this is what he does: create scandals and spread evil – whereas man, as the "*image and likeness*" of God, should spread peace and goodness.

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CHAPTER TWO

Εργασία και πνευματική ζωή
Work and Spiritual Life

Work is a blessing

Geronda, in the old days people used to say, "*Better to wear out your shoes than your blankets.*" What did they mean?

– They meant, "It is better to wear out your shoes by working than to stay in bed and be lazy." Work is a blessing, a gift from God. Work gives vigour to the body and refreshes the mind. If God had not given us work, man would have become mouldy. Those who are diligent continue to work into their old age. If they stop working while they still have strength, they become melancholy; it's like death for them. I remember an elderly man in Konitsa, almost ninety years old, who was constantly working. In the end, he died out on the field, two hours from his home.

Besides, even this bodily comfort, which some people strive for, is not a permanent situation. It is enough to forget their anxiety for that one hour – have their food, their dessert, their bath, their rest. But just as soon as

these things come to an end, they seek some other form of comfort. So, they are constantly distressed because there is always something that they're wanting; they feel an emptiness, and their soul is seeking to fill it. On the other hand, the person who wearies himself from work feels a constant joy, a spiritual joy.

– Geronda, if you have back problems, you just can't do any kind of work.

– True, but doesn't the back need exercise too? Won't work that could be like an exercise for the back help? Listen: If all someone does is eat, drink and sleep, he will start falling apart; he'll feel sleepy all the time because his body and his mind slacken. He'll eventually get to the point where he won't be able to do anything. He gets easily worn out, even by just walking. Instead, if he just works a little and moves about, he strengthens his legs and his arms. You see, those who love work don't sleep much, or from being fatigued – they might not sleep at all. They have all this strength because work has seasoned them and they've become physically strong.

Work is health, particularly for a young person. I have noticed that some pampered young men become tough and hardened once they go to the army. The military does them a lot of good. Of course, in the old days this happened more. Nowadays, they're afraid to push the soldiers, because with a little pushing, they slash their veins; they suffer nervous breakdowns... I tell parents to pay someone who will take their children in to work, in order to promote their health – as long as they are doing something they enjoy. For if a young man who suffers from nerves, and has a good mind as well, does not work, he will become sluggish. And if he sees others making

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progress, he gets confused because of his egoism and is unable to be happy with anything. He constantly has thoughts going through his head and his mind becomes mere pap. Then the devil goes and tells him, "Loser! What a good-for-nothing you are! So and so became a professor; the other person has his own business and is making money – you, where will you end up?" Thus, he despairs. But, once he begins working, he will acquire confidence in himself, in the good sense of the word. He will come to realise that he can get things done; his mind will be occupied with his work and he will be spared those thoughts. Thus, two good things take place.

Choosing a profession

– Geronda, some parents steer their children into taking after their own profession, and they often get very pushy about it.

– No, they shouldn't do that. Parents mustn't pressure their children into doing what they themselves enjoy, if their children don't enjoy it as well. I once knew a young man who wanted to study theology and become a priest, but his mother wouldn't let him; instead, she forced him to go into medicine. The young man had studied Byzantine music and chanted; he had even made his own musical instrument, and found the tones on his own. He knew Byzantine music by heart. He had a gift. He wrote chants and services. As soon as he finished high school, he took the entrance exams and got accepted to the Theological School. His mother had a nervous breakdown because of her grief. She would come to me and beg me: "Father, pray for me to get well, and I'll let my child do whatever

he wants." But when she did get well, she again refused to let him do what he wanted. Later, he abandoned everything and in the end, he wasted away.

This is what I say to young people who are perplexed about which branch of science to follow: "See which field you like, so as to do that which comes natural to you." Now, if what they're thinking of doing doesn't come naturally to them, I try to help them to give their heart to something that comes naturally to them. In other words, I help them follow the education and training they want, so as to create a profession out of what is within their capabilities – provided they do so in harmony with God. Does someone have a calling for music? He should then become a musician or a good chanter who, through his life and his chanting, will help those who hear him, so that they will come to love the Church and prayer. Does he have a calling for art? He should become a painter or iconographer and with piety, make icons, which will also work miracles. Does he have a calling for a certain science? He should become dedicated to it and work with *philotimo*.

You will see that what affinity someone has is evident from an early age. I once met a man at the Monastery of Stomio in Konitsa with his two nephews. One of them, who was about six or seven years old, sat next to us and kept asking us questions. I asked him, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" "A lawyer!" he said. We couldn't find the other one, so I asked his uncle, "Where did the other one go? We don't want him to get hurt by falling fall off a cliff or something." As we went outside to look for him, we heard banging coming from the wood shop. We went inside and what did we see? He

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was pounding a hammer into the smooth plank used for planing that was on the work bench, warping it beyond salvage. "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I asked him. "A cabinet maker!" he tells me. "May you become one," I told him with a smile, adding, "so you destroyed the plank! It's alright!"

Love of work

– Geronda, why do so many people feel bored at work?

– Maybe it's because they don't love their job, or maybe their work has become too much of a routine. With some jobs – say at a factory where they make doors and window frames – a labourer might be doing the same thing from the time he starts his shift, until the time he leaves: place the glue. Another worker may only apply the glass to the frame; yet another applies the putty to the window frame. They constantly do the same job, one monotonous thing over and over again, and their supervisor is always over their shoulder watching them – not for just one or two days, either. It's always the "same old, same old" to the point of boredom. But it wasn't like that in the old days. Back then a carpenter would be given four walls from the contractors and was expected to present the owner with a finished house and the key. He would have built the floors, the doors and window frames, and would even have set the windows with putty. Afterwards he would have built spiral staircases, turned banisters; after that he would have painted, built the cupboards and the shelves – even the furniture! Even if he didn't do all of it himself, he knew how to do it. In a pinch, a carpenter could even put the tiles on the roof.

A lot of people today are tormented because they don't love what they do for a living. They can't wait until it's time to go. However, when one has zeal for work, and when one cares about the things he makes, the more he works, the more his zeal grows. He is immersed in his work, and when it's time to leave, he asks, "Where did the time go?" He even forgets to eat, to rest; he forgets everything! He may not have eaten, but he is not hungry; he may not have slept, but he is not sleepy and may even rejoice over not needing sleep. It's not that he's suffering from hunger or sleeplessness; for him his work is a feast and he enjoys it.

– Geronda, how is it that of two people who do the same work one is spiritually benefitted by what he does, while the other is spiritually harmed?

– It depends on how each one does the work, and what one has within him. If one works with humility and love, everything will be illumined, full of light and graceful, and he will feel inner repose. But if one has prideful thoughts, imagining that he does the work better than the others, he may have a sense of satisfaction, but it doesn't fill his heart, for his soul doesn't sense it; he has no inner repose.

If one doesn't do his work with love, he gets tired and weary. Such a person, merely by looking at the hill he has to climb in order to finish a job, tires simply because he doesn't love that work. The one who loves his work will go up and down the hill numerous times without realising it. One can be digging in the sun for hours and not get tired simply because he loves what he is doing. But if his heart is not in doing the work, he'll keep stopping, loafing around and complaining, "Oh, it's so hot," he says and he suffers.

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– Geronda, can a person be so immersed in his career or his work that he neglects his family?

– A person should simply like his work; he shouldn't fall in love with it. If he doesn't love his work, he will be doubly tired – bodily and mentally – such that even bodily rest will be of no benefit because he will be mentally weary. You see, it is this mental weariness which exhausts a person. When someone puts his heart into his work and is happy, he is mentally at rest and his physical tiredness disappears.

I know a general in the army who still does all the work done by soldiers. He has such love for his soldiers; he is like a father to them! He experiences such joy helping them! He does his duty and really enjoys it. Once he set out at midnight from the Evros River to go to Larissa on the Feast Day of Saint Achillios.[1] He wanted to get there in time for the Divine Liturgy, even though he would have been perfectly justified in being late and only attending the special Doxology that would be sung for the Feast Day. But he thought to himself, "I must be there from the start to honour the Saint." He does everything with his heart. The gratification felt by those who do their work with *philotimo* is a good and wholesome gratification. It has been given by God so that His creation will not tire. This is the true rest from tiredness.

Each one must spiritually develop his gift

Each person should develop his gift for the good, because God, in giving it in the first place, has some expec-

1. Saint Achillios is the patron Saint of Larissa.

tations. The mind, for example, is such a gift of power, but depending on how one uses it, can be used for good or evil. If someone who is very bright uses his mind properly, he may be able to invent things which will help people. But if he doesn't use his mind properly, he might invent, let's say, a way to rob his neighbour.

Or, for example, those who create political cartoons for newspapers can present an entire event in one sketch. If this event has something to do with ecclesiastical issues, the sketch could also reveal a complete theological perspective. Since their minds take such sharp turns, if some of these political cartoonists had studied theology, they would have been able to fathom the depths of divine meanings. That is, they could have developed this nimbleness of the mind; they could have sanctified it, and they could have helped themselves and others. But instead, a lot of them do negative work – obscene if they are obscene, ridiculous if they are ridiculous.

In other words, those with some exceptional ability will become either useful or destructive, whereas those who do not have some exceptional ability won't be able to do great good, but at least they also won't be able to do great harm.

Anxiety and work

– Geronda, a lot of people are irritated when they come home from work.

– I advise men to find a church after work, go inside, light a candle and sit quietly for ten to fifteen minutes, or to go and sit in a park and read a small section of the Gospel, so as to wind down a bit and then to go their

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homes, peaceful and smiling, instead of being irritated and ready to pick a fight. They shouldn't bring their problems at work home with them; they ought to leave them outside.

– But Geronda, some of them are justified, for the responsibility they have at work fills them with anxiety.

– It fills them with anxiety because they don't involve God in their affairs. Even the sluggard who says, "Oh well, God will provide…" is better than they are.

I prefer someone is an employee and do his work well, with *philotimo* – but that he simplify his life, that he restrict himself to the essentials and that he keep his mind free from worry – rather than be a factory owner who constantly whines and moans because he's usually in debt. Pride gets in the way, so he says, "I'll take this much of a loan, so that I can produce this and that, in order to better arrange things for myself…" Then, he finds that he's miscalculated; he goes bankrupt and he has to sell everything, and so forth.

There are also many people who don't put their mind to work; they just get pointlessly tired without having done any work. Then they can't respond to what is expected of them and they get anxious. For example, someone wants to learn a certain trade, but doesn't pay any attention. So, he comes and goes for years on end without making any progress, because he never uses his mind. He has to figure out what he will need for his work and then, go about getting it. Look, when I worked in the world as a carpenter, I realised that I needed a lathe for the furniture I made. What should I have done? Should I have gone to find someone to do the work for me? No, I got myself a lathe and learned how to use it. Next, I saw that I needed

to make spiral staircases. So I sat myself down, called to mind the math and geometry I had learned, and figured out how to make them. If you don't use your mind, you end up tormenting yourself. In other words, what I want to emphasise is that one should put his mind to work, because at work one faces a whole heap of challenges. In this way, he will become a good craftsman and from then on he will know what to do and he will be able to proceed. That's the key. The mind ought to be creative in all matters. Otherwise man remains underdeveloped and wastes his time.

The sanctification of work

Everyone should, by his life and prayers, sanctify his work and be himself sanctified. And, if he is an employer and has responsibilities, he should also help his employees spiritually. If he has a good inner state, he sanctifies his work. For example, when young people go to study under a craftsman to learn a trade, concurrently, they ought to be helped to live spiritually. This will be of benefit not only to the craftsman, but also to his employees and customers, for God will bless his work.

Every profession can be sanctified. For example, a doctor mustn't forget that what helps the most in medicine is the Grace of God. This is why he should strive to become a vessel of Divine Grace. A doctor who is a good Christian, along with being a good scientist, helps the sick with his kindness and his faith, because he encourages them to face their illness with faith. He can say to someone who suffers from a very serious illness: "This

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is as far as medicine has progressed. From this point on however, there is also God Who works miracles."

Or a teacher should try to instruct with joy and help the children in their spiritual rebirth, something which not all parents are able to do, even if they have a good disposition. While teaching them to read, he can also teach them to be good people. Otherwise, what will be the benefit of knowing how to read? Society needs good people who will do well in whatever profession they choose. A teacher shouldn't only pay attention to whether the students know their lessons well; he should also take into consideration the other good qualities children have, such as piety, kindness and *philotimo*. God's grades don't always agree with those of the teacher's. The D that one child receives might be an A in God's eyes, while an A for another child might be a D to God.

The profession does not make the man

– Geronda, when someone is having a hard time at work, what is to blame?

– Could it be that he doesn't approach his work with good thoughts? If he approaches it rightly, then whatever job he does will be a celebration.

– Geronda, what about the person who is embarrassed because he's doing heavy or disdainful work, for example, he works in construction or washes dishes at a restaurant – how should he put things into perspective?

– If he thinks of Christ and how He washed the feet of His disciples,[2] he will stop worrying. It's as if Christ

2. Cf. Jn 13:4-14.

was saying to us: "You should do likewise." Whether one is washing dishes or digging ditches, he should rejoice. Another person may have to clean out sewers filled with germs because the poor man doesn't have any other work. Is he less of a person? Is he not an image of God? Once there was a family man who cleaned out sewers for a living, and who had attained a great spiritual state. He suffered from tuberculosis and although he had the chance to quit, he didn't want to because he thought, "Why should someone else have to suffer?" He loved the scorned life, and for this, God gave him Grace.

Work does not make the man. I once knew a longshoreman who had raised someone from death. When I was the *Dikaios*[3] at the *Skete* of Iveron, I was visited by a man who was about fifty-five years of age. He came late in the afternoon, and not wanting to disturb the Fathers by knocking, he slept outside.

When the Fathers saw him, they brought him inside and told me about him. "Why didn't you ring the bell so we could let you in and take care of you?" I asked him. "What are you saying, Father, how could I possibly disturb the monks?" he said. I noticed that his face had a certain radiance. I understood that he must live very spiritually. He told me that he was orphaned at a young age when his father died, which was why, when he later married, that he loved his father-in-law so very much. Before going home, he always stopped by his in-laws.

But he was constantly worried because his father-in-law swore a lot. He had pleaded with him many times not to swear, but he only got worse. At one point, his

3. *Dikaios* is the Leader of a *Skete*, who is chosen each year by its Elders.

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father-in-law became seriously ill. They took him to the hospital, but after a few days, he died. The man was not with him at the hour he gave up his soul because he was unloading a ship. When he arrived at the hospital and found him in the morgue, he prayed with great pain: "My God, I beg Thee to resurrect him that he may repent, and then take him." Right then, the dead man opened his eyes and moved his hands. As soon as they saw this, the personnel who were there ran away. He got his things together and took him home, perfectly well! He lived another five years in repentance and then died. The man said to me, "My Father, I thank God so much for doing me this favour. Who am I that God would grant me such Grace?" He had great simplicity and such humility that it didn't even enter his mind that he had raised someone from the dead. He was completely dissolved by gratitude to God for what had been granted to him.

Many people torment themselves because they do not succeed in being glorified with vain honours or in becoming rich with empty things. They don't realise that such things are not needed in the other life, the true life, nor that they cannot be carried over. There, we can only take our good actions, which having removed us from here (this life), will grant us the necessary passport for our great and eternal journey.

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